

Hoping Against All Hope

SERIES: DANIEL: LIVING BY FAITH IN A FAITHLESS WORLD

Between Christmas and New Year's I had the opportunity to go steelhead fishing with two of our elders. Steelhead fishing is not for the faint of heart. We left the Bay Area at 3:00 AM and drove for about 3 1/2 hours. We arrived at the Eel River while it was still dark. And then we fished. We fished in the freezing early morning hours. We fished as the sun broke through and warmed our numb fingers. We fished through the afternoon until it was too dark to see our poles. In almost 12 hours of fishing we caught one steelhead and two spawned-out salmon. Personally, I didn't land a single fish, though I hooked into one steelhead, fought it for about ten minutes before it snapped my line. Frank, the expert among our threesome, said among steelhead fisherman that was a good day. Some guys fish their entire lives and never hook a steelhead.

Someone might ask the question, why would someone want to fish all day with the strong possibility they won't catch a thing? Fishing is all about hope. The fisherman thrives on the experience of thinking he's about to catch something. His line goes taut, and he's sure it's a fish. The line goes slack, and he's sure the fish will come back. Fishing is hope experienced! Each cast is a recommitment to hope. Without the belief that the big strike will come any moment, there is no reason to go on.

Without hope, without eager expectation, the human spirit dies. While there's life there's hope, we say, but the deeper truth is that while there's hope there's life. Take away hope and life becomes mere existence - uninteresting, ungratifying, bleak, drab, a burden and a bore. People without hope often wish they were dead. J.I. Packer writes, "The fact of the matter is that we human beings are made so that we live very much in our own fancied future. This is not a policy decision but simply the way we are. To look forward, to dream of happy things to come, to want what is good to continue and what is bad to end, and to long for a future that is better than the past is as natural as breathing. As Alexander Pope said in his pompous way, 'Hope springs eternal in the human breast; Man never is, but always to be blest.'"

From start to finish, the Bible is a book about hope. The first recorded divine promise, that the woman's seed would someday crush the serpent's head, was a word of hope in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:15). And the last recorded promise of Jesus found in Revelation, "**I am coming soon,**" is a word of hope for churches facing persecution (Rev. 22:20). We often call the Christian a believer. I think we might better call him a hoper. Paul prays in Romans, "**May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit**" (Rom. 15:13). He is the "God of hope" and his desire is that we "overflow with hope." Hope is not mere optimism; it's not wishful thinking. It's not like saying, "I hope I get that promotion," or "I hope the Raiders win." Christian

hope is a certainty, guaranteed by God himself, that the best is yet to come. It's a certainty that thrives even in the face of overwhelming odds. It was said of Abraham, "**In hope against hope he believed...**" (Rom. 4:18).

As we come to the final chapters of Daniel we see that God is calling his people to "hope against hope." To keep believing, despite the appearance of things. Last week we began to look at the last vision that Daniel received. We saw that it was a prophecy of such magnitude that Daniel experienced a great struggle just to be able to receive it. The prophecy is found in chapters 11 and 12. We can divide it up into three parts: 1) 11:2-35 concerns the future of Israel in the next few hundred years up until the time of a very evil king. This is probably the most detailed prophecy in the Bible and we'll just look at this briefly because it deals with events that are to us past. 2) 11:36-12:4 is a prophecy about the very end of history. We will look at this in more detail because it concerns us and is the source of our hope even today. 3) 12:5-13 is a postscript to the prophecy where we're given instruction about what to do in the meantime.

A DETAILED HISTORY 11:2-35

As we look at what was in store for Israel in the next few hundred years we can see why Daniel would have to brace himself to hear it. He's told in v. 2 that the Persian empire in which he lived would be conquered by Greece. The next few verses describe the rise and fall of Alexander the Great. Starting in v. 5 and extending through v. 20 he is told that Israel will be caught between the rivalries of different parts of the Greek empire. To the north of Israel was Syria which would be ruled by the Seleucid dynasty. To the south was Egypt which would be ruled by the Ptolemaic dynasty. The kings of the north would be in constant battle with the kings of the south and Israel would be caught in the middle. But things will get even worse. Verse 21 says "**a despicable person will arise.**" We know this was Antiochus Epiphanes from the north. Verse 31 says "**forces from him will desecrate the sanctuary fortress and do away with the regular sacrifice...and set up the abomination of desolation.**" Verses 32-35 describe a group of Jews who will take action against him, many of whom will "**fall by the sword and by flame.**" This would clearly be a devastating time for the Jewish people.

All of this was fulfilled with amazing accuracy. As a matter of fact, it is so accurate that there is a whole group of liberal scholars who believe that there is no way that this could have been written centuries before it happened; there is no way God or anyone else can predict the future in such detail. They go on to say that it was written after the fact and it is just pretending to be prophecy. This would be like me writing a book

today, predicting that a guy named George W. Bush would win the Presidency by a hair, and then pretend that I wrote that book during the Revolutionary War! But remember, the theme of Daniel is the sovereignty of God. Despite present appearances, God is in control. We already learned of a book which is the book of history as it is shaped and crafted by God. God is in control of history and so he can tell his people what is going to happen. This doesn't excuse us from taking responsibility. We still have choices to make and those choices make a difference. But God wants us to know when we are in the midst of trial and tragedy that he is in control.

Isn't that good to know? Aren't you glad that God didn't just wind up the world and then walk away from it all? Aren't you glad that God is not a weakling who wants to do something about evil but can't? Aren't you glad his invisible hand still guides and shapes history? I can't explain why God allows this or that to happen. I can't explain why God allowed your son to die, or your marriage to fail, or your daughter to be hit by a car. But I can tell you that God loves you and is working out his good purpose through all these things. He's not cruel. He doesn't rejoice to see his children suffer. Jesus showed us the heart of God. Matthew says that when Jesus saw the crowds, **"he felt compassion on them because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd"** (Mt. 9:36). That's the compassion of God. At the tomb of his friend Lazarus, Jesus saw the sorrow of death, and he wept (Jn. 11:35). Those are the tears of God. He cares. But for some reason, in his infinite wisdom, he has chosen to allow sin and its consequences to run its course.

THE TIME OF THE END 11:40-12:4

Starting in v. 36 there is a shift from Israel's immediate future to the very end of history. It appears to be talking about this same evil king, but several things signal that the prophecy is now reaching farther into the future. Note v. 40 begins with the words, **"At the end time..."** This takes us to the edge of history. It's also true that the description of this king in vv. 36-45 just doesn't fit with the life and death of Antiochus Epiphanies. Jesus himself applied these words not to Antiochus but to a time yet future. This is how prophecy often works. The prophet will see into the future and describe something as if it was one event, but the actual fulfilling of that prophecy takes place in multiple phases over a long period of time.

Recently I went hiking with a friend to the top of Missions Peak in Fremont. As we looked to the east we saw a rather daunting hill. My friend, who knows those parts well, said to me, "If you walk this trail about 30 miles in that direction you will end up in Livermore." I said to him, "Yea, but you have to climb that hill." And he said, "That's not all. Once you get over that hill, there are a couple more hills you can't even see." This is how the prophets saw into the future. They saw one hill and described it, but the fulfillment reaches further into the future than that one hill. Antiochus was a type of another evil king who would come at the end of history.

So what does Daniel see at this point? What can we expect to happen at the end of history and why should this cause us to overflow with hope? There are five significant

events that Daniel sees.

1. **The rise of Antichrist:** First, he sees the rise of the one the NT calls the Antichrist. Look at vv. 36-45,

"Then the king will do as he pleases, and he will exalt and magnify himself above every god, and will speak monstrous things against the God of gods; and he will prosper until the indignation is finished, for that which is decreed will be done, and he will show no regard for the gods of his fathers or for the desire of women, nor will he show regard for any other god; for he will magnify himself above them all. But instead he will honor a god of fortresses, a god whom his fathers did not know; he will honor him with gold, silver, costly stones, and treasures. And he will take action against the strongest of fortresses with the help of a foreign god; he will give great honor to those who acknowledge him, and he will cause them to rule over the many, and will parcel out land for a price. And at the end time the king of the South will collide with him, and the king of the North will storm against him with chariots, with horsemen, and with many ships; and he will enter countries, overflow them, and pass through. He will also enter the Beautiful Land, and many countries will fall; but these will be rescued out of his hand: Edom, Moab and the foremost of the sons of Ammon. Then he will stretch out his hand against other countries, and the land of Egypt will not escape. But he will gain control over the hidden treasures of gold and silver, and over all the precious things of Egypt; and Libyans and Ethiopians will follow at his heels. But rumors from the east and from the North will disturb him, and he will go forth with great wrath to destroy and annihilate many. And he will pitch the tents of his royal pavilion between the seas and the beautiful Holy Mountain; yet he will come to his end, and no one will help him."

At the end of history there will be a king who is incredibly proud. He will do as he pleases and exalt himself above even God. His mouth will be full of blasphemies. He will be victorious in battle, move into Israel ("the Beautiful Land"), and set up his headquarters somewhere near Jerusalem. This is the one Jesus described in Mark 13:14 as bringing an abomination into the Temple of God. Paul called him **"the man of lawlessness,"** and described him as **"opposing and exalting himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the Temple of God, displaying himself as being God"** (2 Thess. 2:3-4).

We sometimes laugh at this kind of thing. Who would believe such a man? But Paul says **"his coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders and with all the deception of wickedness"** (2 Thess. 2:9). This guy will be attractive; he will appear to be everything we need in a leader. He will seem to hold the answers to the great problems of our world.

2. **The Great Tribulation:** Second, and associated with his coming, Daniel sees the Great Tribulation. Look at chapter 12,

“Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise.”

As we saw last week, there is spiritual warfare going on in heavenly places that plays out on earth. Michael, the archangel, rises up for Israel. Revelation 12:7 describes this same event when it says, **“there was war in heaven, Michael and his angels waging war with the dragon.”** This precipitates a time of great distress on earth. Jesus spoke of this when he said, **“There will be a great tribulation, such has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will”** (Mt. 24:21). This period will culminate in what Revelation calls the battle of Armageddon where the kings of the north and south will gather in Israel for a great war.

3. The Second Coming: But then, by the grace of God, it will all suddenly come to an end. Jesus said, **“Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short”** (Mt. 24:22). This is what Daniel describes at the end of v. 1,

“And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued.”

Here we see once again that there is a book. This book has all the names of God's people in it. They will be rescued when Jesus Christ himself appears in the clouds. This is the third thing Daniel saw - the rescue of God's people which the NT says comes at the Second Coming of Christ. The first time Jesus came in meekness and humility; the second time he will come in power and glory and judgment.

4. The resurrection: This great event will trigger the resurrection of the dead. This is the fourth thing Daniel saw. Look at v. 2,

“And many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt.”

This is the only place in the OT that says all people who have died will be resurrected, some to eternal life and others to eternal destruction. Jesus spoke of this. In John 5:28,29 Jesus said, **“An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life; those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.”** People say, “When I die, it's six feet under. That's it. That's the end. Like a candle being snuffed out, it's all over.” But Jesus says that's not the end. Everyone will rise again to face judgment. Everyone will be held accountable. Thomas Watson wrote, “We are more sure to rise out of our graves than out of our beds.”

5. The exaltation of the wise: Finally, those who are raised up to everlasting life are exalted. Look at v. 3,

“And those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like

the stars forever and ever.”

Notice he describes “those who have insight” or “those who are wise.” What does that mean? Throughout this book we have had a great model of one with wisdom and insight in Daniel, haven't we? As he served pagan kings, he showed us that wisdom consists in living a life of cooperation without compromise. He refused to eat the king's food and he refused to bow down to the king's idol. He's showed us wisdom means being willing to speak the hard truth to a fearsome king as he read the writing on the wall. He showed us that wisdom involves being a man or woman of prayer. Basically, he shows us that wisdom starts with being in relationship with God. Proverbs tells us **“the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”** That doesn't mean you cower before God; it means you live your life recognizing that he is Lord of all that you do. He's at the center. He's your frame of reference. He's your refuge. The wise put their hope in God. And because of that, he describes them here in an exalted state. They will shine like the expanse of heaven. God will beautify his people. The NT says **“when he appears we will be like him, because we will see him just as he is”** (1 John 3:2).

6. Application: This is our hope. Our hope is that despite what may happen to us, Christ will come again and raise us up to everlasting life and make us as bright as the expanse of heaven. Does the prospect of that thrill your heart? Does it keep you on the edge of your seat? If it doesn't, it may be because life is just going so well. You have a nice home, a great family, a good job. You are healthy. You have people around you love you and care for you. Life is good, and I'm the first to say that you should enjoy that and thank God for all his gifts. But sometimes, the good things of this world intoxicate us from really desiring and longing for the true hope of heaven. The person with a full stomach doesn't look forward to his next meal. That's how we are sometimes. But every once in a while, we hear a whisper, “Is this all there is? What if I lose all this? What happens beyond all this? Why is your heart still hungry?” That whisper is worth listening to. It's the whisper of God saying he has something so much better for you. Why settle for McDonalds when you can have a banquet?

On the other hand, it might be because life is so hard. The hard realities of life have crushed your ability to hope. Your hope is as fragile as tissue paper. It's been ripped up by life's blows. Perhaps you tend to be negative anyway and life has just confirmed your worst fears. This is where Israel was. This word of hope came to them in the midst of suffering. Some of them may have resented it because some of them had turned cynical and sarcastic. Have you? I meet a lot of believers who have become cynical about life. They're believers, but they're not hoppers. They really don't expect God to do anything. Like Abraham, you must hope against hope. You must keep hoping when it doesn't seem to make sense.

About five years ago, a well-known Christian social critic, Richard John Neuhaus, was being driven from the Pittsburgh airport to a speaking engagement. During the drive, one of his hosts, a cynical man, went on and on about how America was going down the tubes. He cited case after case. After the tedious drive, Neuhaus offered him these words of advice, “The times may be bad, but they are the only times we are given. Remember, hope is still a Christian virtue, and despair is a mortal

sin." Paul put it this way, **"Faith, hope, and love, in these three abide"** (1 Cor. 13:13).

GO YOUR WAY TO THE END 12:4-13

Verses 4-13 form a kind of postscript to the vision where Daniel is told to preserve the angel's words; to seal it up for the time of the end. He overhears one angel ask another, "How long until the end?" Then Daniel gets in on the act and asks, "What will the outcome of all this be?" That's what we want to know, isn't it? We want to know how long until this happens and exactly what's going to happen.

But the answer Daniel gets is not a lot of help. The answer is "a time, times, and half a time." Later he tells Daniel it will be 1,290 days, and then in the next breath he speaks of 1,335 days. As James Boice writes, "No one has ever conclusively shown what those two periods refer to." Some say it's the three and a half years between the abomination of desolation and the return of Christ. Others say it's an enigmatic way of saying that the time will be prolonged and then finally stopped. The important thing for us comes in the last verse where the angel tells Daniel what to do in the meantime,

"But as for you, go your way to the end; then you will enter into rest and rise again for your allotted portion at the end of the age."

What are we to do as we wait for the end? Two things. First, we are to get on with our life ("Go your way to the end"). We can't bail out on life. We shouldn't think that this means we are to stop being responsible. We're to continue to be faithful to do what God has called us to do. Second, we are to remember the reward. Daniel will die ("enter into rest") but he will rise again for his allotted portion. That's his reward. That's his inheritance. That's his hope. Isn't it great that we're going to see Daniel in heaven! We've lived with him now for about four months. But we will be in eternity with him. You see, if we know Jesus Christ, Daniel's hope is our hope.

CONCLUSION

It's that hope that will keep us going. A couple of weeks ago I went and saw the movie, *Castaway*. You probably know it's about a guy that is stranded on a deserted island for four years. It's a story of survival. Throughout that time, there was one thing that kept him alive. It was hope. He had a picture of his fiancé that survived the plane wreck and he kept that by his bedside for four long years. That's what we have to do. We have to keep the hope of seeing Jesus Christ face to face by our side through all the storms of life. We have to keep hoping. We have to be more than just believers, we have to be hoppers.