

Saints Triumphant

November 16, 2003

Daniel 12:1-3

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

God's People Have a Bright Future

1. We will be protected in distress
2. We will wake to everlasting life
3. We will shine like the stars

NIV Daniel 12:1 "At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people-- everyone whose name is found written in the book-- will be delivered. 2 Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. 3 Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.

Fellow Saints Triumphant,

I heard recently that the city of San Francisco is going to start licensing fortune-tellers. City officials say that the move to requiring licenses of fortune-tellers is not meant to legitimize the practice telling fortunes, but rather to place some controls on it. Apparently quite a few people have lost hundreds and even thousands of dollars to fortune-tellers. Until now there was very little that the police could do help the victims. Licensing might change that.

But isn't there something terribly sad about the fact that there are people so anxious about their future that they'll spend significant sums of money to hear what some spiritualist has to say? It's plain that people who fall for such frauds don't have the confidence that's inspired in Christians by the gospel of Jesus. As the people of God through faith in Jesus Christ we know that we have a bright future. Today's Old Testament lesson from Daniel 12 is just one of hundreds of passages in the Bible where, in the words of one of our hymns, the distant triumph song steals on our ear. Even when the fight is fierce and the warfare long, we know that we who are the saints of God will triumph in the end. Daniel's vision of the future for believers is as rich in comfort as it is rich in imagery. The prophet assures us 1] that we will be protected in distress, 2] that we will wake to everlasting life, and 3] that we will shine like the stars in heaven.

1. We will be protected in distress

Daniel, recall, was a Jew who, as a bright and promising young man, had been taken from Israel to Babylon, where he was trained to serve the kingdom of

Babylon. Daniel's wisdom and ability were such that when the Persians defeated the Babylonians, the Persians asked him to serve in their government. He did so with distinction, but would never compromise his faith in the LORD. This was the Daniel who was lowered into a den of lions because he wouldn't quit praying to the LORD. Daniel, the statesman, was also a prophet of the LORD. Here in the closing chapters of his prophecy he relates a vision he had in the year 539 B.C.

Some of what Daniel writes is sobering: *"There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then."* The prophets, the apostles, and Jesus himself are all consistent in saying that as Judgment Day grows closer the world will become more and more ungodly. Daniel here foretells a time of unparalleled distress. If the book of Daniel seems sort of obscure to you, you should know that it was not obscure to Jesus. Jesus quotes Daniel in Matthew 24. Speaking of the time just before the end of the world, Jesus says, **"For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again."** (Matt. 24:21) It's going to be a time of all-out opposition to God, a time of false prophets and persecution, of wars and famines and earthquakes. The last days of world history will be a time of distress and tribulation like the world has never seen, Jesus and Daniel say.

I think a standard reaction to a prediction like this is to say, "I hope I'm not around to see these things. I don't know if I'd be able to survive with my faith intact." But in order to calm these anxious thoughts of ours, the Bible also tells us here, *"At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise."* God hasn't left his people to face this distress by themselves. He has appointed the archangel Michael to serve as our protector. Because God is at work through his agent Michael to protect his people, it says at the end of this verse, *"But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered."* In other words, through faith in Jesus we know the end of the story. We know how it turns out. God's people are going to be delivered. There are times when we don't want to know in advance how something turns out. If you're watching a football game that you videotaped because you couldn't watch it live, you don't want someone to tell you the final score. If you're reading a mystery, you don't want someone to tell you how it ends. But in this case we don't want to live in suspense. Instead of living in fear, always wondering, "Will I make it?" these promises of God enable us to live in the boldness that says, "I will make it!" The reason for this certainty is that God has sent Michael and the rest of his angels to defeat Satan and his demons and to defend us from every evil attack.

I suppose there's one more question that might be lingering in our minds. It says here that God's people will be delivered—everyone whose name is found written in the book. We might wonder, "How do I know that I'm one of God's people?" Never having seen the God's book, we might wonder whether our name is actually written in it. The answer to such questions is actually quite simple. If you trust in Jesus, your name is written in that book. On the day you were

baptized, God wrote your name in his book. Through faith in Jesus you belong to the people of God and you will be delivered.

But there would seem to be one big obstacle that's lurking between us and this deliverance: death. Death is no respecter of persons. Whether you're rich or poor, whether you're a somebody or a nobody, whether you're an atheist or a Christian, death comes to all. But the Bible promises here and elsewhere that not even this last great enemy can dim the brightness of our future as believers because we will awaken from death to everlasting life.

2. We will awake to everlasting life

Daniel looks ahead to the day of Christ's return and says, "*Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.*" What Daniel is teaching us here is called "the general resurrection" of the dead. It's not just believers who are going to awaken from death; unbelievers will awaken, too. As much as unbelievers might have believed that death would be the end of them, it will not be. Their existence will continue, but it will be an existence of shame and everlasting contempt in hell, away from the presence of God and away from the people of God. The blaring trumpet of Judgment Day is a wake-up call they hoped they'd never hear.

But this same passage that contains such a stern warning for unbelievers contains the most beautiful consolation for believers. Believers whose bodies were asleep in the dust of the earth will awake to everlasting life. Here is the source of courage we need to face our own death and the source of comfort we need as we mourn the deaths of fellow believers. Death is not the end. Death is merely the temporary separation of body and soul. At death the body sleeps in the dust of the earth, but the souls of believers go to be with God. But when Jesus comes, those dead bodies of believers are going to be roused from their slumber and reunited with their souls for a life with God in heaven that never ends.

There are times in our lives when we could hardly find the strength to go on if we didn't believe this promise. I was reading in the paper this past week about the funeral of a young Turlock woman, a soldier, who was coming back to Turlock for a surprise visit to her parents when the helicopter in which she was being transported was shot down by an Iraqi missile. The article went on to detail the heart-rending grief of the young woman's family. She was so young, so dearly loved by her family, and with a future so promising. Last week was to have been a time of reunion and rejoicing, but it became a time of painful separation and grief. My eyes filled with tears just reading the story and seeing the picture of her grieving family—and I didn't even know her. But these are precisely the times when God's promise of everlasting life in Jesus means the most. For God's people there is going to be a reunion because we will when Jesus calls us awaken from death to life everlasting. And at that awakening the former things are going to be past and gone. **"There will be no more death or mourning or**

crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away,” it says in Revelation (21:4).

In place of the old order of things, there will be a new heaven and a new earth. The final verse of this section is the one that enables us to say that God’s people literally have a bright future.

3. We will shine like the stars

It says here, *“Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.”* The Bible doesn’t say anything about needing sunglasses in heaven, but from this verse it sounds like we might need them—or perhaps a welder’s visor. It says that the wise—that is, believers—and those who lead many to righteousness (those who share the good news of the righteousness that we have through faith in Jesus) will shine like the stars.

Daniel’s description of the glory of heaven is consistent with what the Bible tells us in many other places about heaven. We know that we’re going to see Jesus in all his glory in heaven. We won’t need the sun in heaven, it says in Revelation, because the Lamb of God will be our lamp. But it won’t just be Jesus whose appearance in heaven will be glorious; ours will be too. St. Paul says in Philippians that our Lord Jesus Christ **“...by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”** In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul’s great resurrection chapter, he says that the body that is **“sown in dishonor...is raised in glory.”** (15:43) During our lives here on earth in this vale of tears there have been so many things that have hidden from our eyes the glory that will be ours: the impurity of sin and the intrusion of sorrow and the inevitability of death. But even in our most difficult days and our most sorrowful hours, God wants us know that a brilliant future awaits us through Jesus. That’s why in the book of Revelation Jesus gives us an advance screening of the sight of his Bride, the Church, in its heavenly glory. St. John saw it and he reports, **“(He) showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal.”** (21:4) As a believer in Jesus, that glory is yours to look forward to.

Like Revelation, the book of Daniel has its share of sobering and even frightening images. These images serve to remind us that the enemies of God and his Church are not to be taken lightly. Their hatred is great and their power is real. But even as we look at the devil and all his forces arrayed against us, we can be confident. Through Jesus our Savior, our future is bright. In Christ we already know how the battle turns out. We win. Amen.