

How Knowing the Future of God's People Should Affect Us Right Now

By Steve Burchett



Believers know the future. That doesn't mean we have knowledge of certain specifics (future spouse, job, number of children, etc.). But we can be confident in what the Bible says God has planned and promised, and that should change how we think and act in the present.

In Daniel 8, during “the third year of the reign of King Belshazzar” (approximately 548 B.C.), Daniel was given a vision of future centuries. He

learned that coming empires would rise and fall. He observed that there would be great and deadly conflict among world powers (vv. 3-8), particularly between the Medo-Persian king (represented by a ram; vv. 3-4, 20) and the Greek king (represented by a goat; vv. 5-8; 21-22). He was also told about a figure who would come on the scene, oppose God, harm and destroy many of God's people (now back in the land after Babylonian exile), lead many Jews to walk away from Yahweh, and bring Israel's worship in the temple to a temporary end (vv. 9-12; 23-25).

But Daniel 8 is not just about a dark future. In his vision, Daniel is privy to a conversation between two angels. One of the angels asks, “For how long is the vision concerning the regular burnt offering, the transgression that makes desolate, and the giving over of the sanctuary and host to be trampled underfoot?” (v. 13). In other words, how long would the decimation of God's people last? “For 2,300 evenings and mornings. Then the sanctuary shall be restored to its rightful state” (v. 14). Whether that means 2,300 days or 1,150 days (if the number is referencing morning and evening offerings), the point remains: the suffering would last quite awhile, but not forever! This “little horn” (v. 9) who would come against God's people with an unprecedented wrath was not there “by his own power” (v. 24), but by God's sovereign plan (thematic throughout Daniel), “and he shall be broken — but by no human hand” (v. 25). That happened in 164 B.C., just as predicted. The Lord raises men up, and he cuts them down!

We are in a similar situation as Daniel. As we look to the future we know what is coming: the *volatility* of powerful empires and institutions and people; *hostility* on a global stage but also experienced personally for being a Christian; *depravity* of all kinds that will at times seem unusually oppressive; the *trickery* of this world and false teachers that leads to *apostasy* by some who previously professed faith in Christ. But we also know this: our omniscient, omnipotent God will deliver us at his appointed time.

Consider Daniel's reaction to this vision and interpretation: “And I, Daniel, was overcome and lay sick for some days. Then I rose and went about the king's business, but I was appalled by the vision and did not understand it” (v. 27). That might not be quite how you would have thought “courageous” Daniel would respond, but perhaps he is more human, and relatable, than we might have realized. In fact, he shows us how we should respond to what we know is in the future for God's people — both their suffering and final salvation. I'll mention two responses.

First, when we think about the suffering and final salvation that lies ahead for believers, we should respond *with concern for what they will experience*. Even though Daniel would not personally experience the tribulations he saw in the vision, it was difficult data to process to the point that he even had a physical response. It could be that there was some sin involved in this reaction, but not necessarily. It is possible to be both sad about a situation and confident in the Lord at the same time. Consider, for example, the Thessalonians who were grieving because of the loss of fellow Christians (1 Thess 4:13-18). Paul didn't write to them to tell them to stop grieving, but so that they would know how to grieve “with hope.” Or consider Jesus weeping just before he raised Lazarus from the dead. Sadness and confidence just might be closer friends than we realized.

So there is a way to not sin while being very concerned about, for example, what younger believers will face in the days ahead. And it's okay not to understand God's ways in bringing such suffering into some missionaries' lives. We might even “feel like not eating” when thinking about what believers we love will face. Perhaps that physical reaction is not because of a lack of faith, but because of a heart of love. You might call this “sanctified” concern.

Second, we should respond to the suffering and final salvation that lies ahead for God's people *with conduct that honors the Lord as we anticipate deliverance*. Though Daniel was initially devastated, he did not let the knowledge of future pain and apostasy keep him down for long. After “some days,” he “rose and went about the king's business” (v. 27). And then, about a decade after this, Daniel showed extraordinary boldness by speaking the hard truth to King Belshazzar (see Daniel 5). Daniel pressed on because he knew that difficulties would one day end; he believed God's kingdom was an everlasting kingdom enjoyed by those whom God will finally deliver at his appointed time. Though he was concerned about the suffering of future generations, he kept on for the Lord in the present.

Opposition and pain are ahead for God's people (including having to watch some apostatize), but not forever. The King is coming back. In the meantime, let's be about the King's business.