

5. Surprise Party

Texts: Daniel 5.

Quotes:

- I cannot conceive of a personal God who would directly influence the actions of individuals, or would directly sit in judgment on creatures of his own creation. I cannot do this in spite of the fact that mechanistic causality has, to a certain extent, been placed in doubt by modern science. My religiosity consists in a humble admiration of the infinitely superior spirit that reveals itself in the little that we, with our weak and transitory understanding, can comprehend of reality. Morality is of the highest importance—but for us, not for God. *Albert Einstein, Aug. 25, 1927.*

Introductory questions

Was Belshazzar particularly worse than many other ancient kings? What was so wrong in this instance? How does God look in this story? Was he still trying to win the Babylonians or not? Is there a point at which God “gives up”? If so, how would we know? Do you think the Devil could gain some advantage from this incident? What are the real issues?

Discussion ideas

Once again the historical situation may mean that God is placed in a less-than-ideal position. After all his work with Nebuchadnezzar, here God is dealing with his “son” (actually grandson) Belshazzar. One wonders how much God had already worked with B. before this event took place. Certainly B. had the evidence from his grandfather, and yet seemingly did not pay any attention to the true God. Was this truly a *surprise* party?

Coming immediately after N.’s declaration in Daniel 4, the drunken banquet of Daniel 5 is particularly striking. Why was it so necessary for B. to have the golden goblets from the temple at Jerusalem brought to use at the feast? It would seem hardly necessary except as a deliberate act. B. appears to be deliberately taking a course to demean the true God by using such sacred vessels in a profane way; a provocative act that would be seen as proclaiming the superiority of Babylonian gods. Just like the actions of N. with the golden image, B. is laying down the gauntlet to the true God. In a sense, God has little option but to intervene directly.

The reaction of the king to the writing suggests that he knew very well what he had been doing. This is the response of a guilty man, rather than simple “confusion.” He wants to know not only what the writing says, but what it means—what is the verdict?

The queen’s intervention clearly shows that Daniel’s past actions are still well remembered, and that his previous prominence is recalled. (It is perhaps surprising, in view of his abilities, Daniel is no longer in a position of influence). As the lesson speculates, perhaps the queen shared N.’s view of the God of Daniel.

Before Daniel gives the interpretation, he reminds all present that it is God to whom all credit is due. He even recalls the incident, Surely embarrassing to the royal family, of N.’s madness and its reason/consequences. The immediate cause of the writing on the wall, says Daniel, is that B. has not humbled himself, “even though you knew all this.” That is the telling phrase—a deliberate refusal to recognize God in spite of clear evidence. This shows that B. had been given plenty of opportunity to act wisely and correctly, and had abused this privilege. “You did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways...” 5:23 NIV.

Once again Daniel is there at the center of events. He does not seek power and prestige—in fact he tells the king to keep his gifts, but he still is telling the truth and sharing God. The tragedy is that it is too late for B. The tragedy is that God wanted to save him too...

Ellen White Comments

In that last night of mad folly, Belshazzar and his lords had filled up the measure of their guilt and the guilt of the Chaldean kingdom. No longer could God's restraining hand ward off the impending evil. Through manifold providences, God had sought to teach them reverence for His law. "We would have healed Babylon," He declared of those whose judgment was now reaching unto heaven, "but she is not healed." Jeremiah 51:9. Because of the strange perversity of the human heart, God had at last found it necessary to pass the irrevocable sentence. Belshazzar was to fall, and his kingdom was to pass into other hands. {PK 530.3}

Every nation that has come upon the stage of action has been permitted to occupy its place on the earth, that the fact might be determined whether it would fulfill the purposes of the Watcher and the Holy One. Prophecy has traced the rise and progress of the world's great empires--Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. With each of these, as with the nations of less power, history has repeated itself. Each has had its period of test; each has failed, its glory faded, its power departed. {PK 535.1}

Extra material

Often this story is cited as an example of God's punishment? But is that the best interpretation? Is not a better conclusion that God simply "gave up" on Belshazzar, and allowed effects to follow causes. After all, it was not God who directly killed Belshazzar. In choosing to have this orgiastic banquet at a time when he should have been considering his capital's defense, in ignoring the threat to the kingdom and deciding to party instead of taking decisive action. Belshazzar sealed his own fate. His actions also in deliberately profaning the vessels from the temple in Jerusalem show a crass contempt and a deliberate rejection of divine counsel, and a refusal even to consider divine aid even at such a critical moment. It is just that God cannot allow such actions not to have their inevitable results. But what of other examples?

What of the end-time plagues, poured out without mercy by an angry and unpleasant God on his erring children, knowing that they are unable to repent, that probation is closed? How strange—that God should rain down his wrath on those who cannot change, when forgiveness is denied them. Very, very strange—but who are we to question God, even if it seems so wrong? It's just God's "strange work".

That's the way that the End is so often pictured. When the plagues fall, God pours out his unmerciful wrath on the wicked, knowing that this cannot convert them. Is it a question of God's patience running out, to be replaced by his avenging wrath... Is it really true that God's patience that runs out?

Look at what happens in the plagues. The wicked refuse to change, even though as a result they experience pain that might lead them to repent. In the plagues we have the clearest demonstration that whatever happens, such people refuse to change. They really, truly, absolutely DO NOT WANT GOD. In no way, in no case, in no situation would they ever consider coming to him.

That's what the plagues show us. Not that God deliberately inflicts suffering on those who can't repent anyway. The reason why God can proclaim the end of probation is that he knows the final decisions of everyone. The plagues are a demonstration of what God himself knows, but others do not. They provide conclusive proof that nothing more could ever be done for such people. *It's not a perfect God running out of his infinite patience! Rather it's God proving that he has run out of patients.* There simply are no more who will come to him. All through time God has had his patients. Those who are sinful (like all of us) but who wish to be healed, to be changed. But even with the most drastic motivation, the wicked at the End will refuse to go to God. They have made their irrevocable decision. Even though they are terminally ill, fatally sick, they will not go to the only Healer. They will not become his patients.

God has no more patients. Even God has the awful experience of being powerless to change the choice of his beloved children. That is what the plagues prove. They do not prove God to be an arbitrary being who decides to finish at an arbitrary time. They simply show him in the very best light, revealing how he has worked for all his fallen children, and the ultimate consequences of free choice. We either accept God's treatment for our terminal disease of sin; or we reject it. He is patient with us, but we must become his patients. And when he has done all he can, when we make our final decision and God has no more of this world's sin-sick and evil-crippled to work with, the surgery is closed—for God has run out of patients.

6. An Ancient Death Decree

Texts: Daniel 6.

Quotes:

- You want us to believe in a “god” that is a totalitarian dictator who imposes his will on all, damns to an eternity of punishment for 70 or so years of life if that individual fails to believe the “truths” the omnipotent dictator’s hypocritical followers espouse as the word of said god, and does it all in the name of “love” for us. *Rockisdeaddclxv on atforumz.com, 07-03-2004*
- If God kills, lies, cheats, discriminates, and otherwise behaves in a manner that puts the Mafia to shame, that’s okay, he’s God. He can do whatever he wants. Anyone who adheres to this philosophy has had his sense of morality, decency, justice and humaneness warped beyond recognition by the very book that is supposedly preaching the opposite. *Dennis McKinsey*

Introductory questions

What is the significance of this story? Is it an endorsement of stubbornly clinging to religious practices, or is there a deeper truth here? Once again, when is it rationalization and compromise (Daniel could have shut the windows, after all), and when is it a matter of principle? What does the end of the evil schemers tell us? How does God look in all of this?

Discussion ideas

As always, we’re considering how such Biblical information relates to our concept of God and how he operates in the context of the Great Controversy. There are plenty of questions here. Once again it is far more than just a matter of prayer. The devil uses Daniel’s faithfulness as a weapon against him, deliberately targeting him because of his influence.

The king is tricked. Darius says some interesting things—even to the point of being convinced (?) that Daniel’s God would save him. He asks in the morning if Daniel’s God has been able to save him. Darius certainly sees the issue at the level of the divine! However his decree at the end enforcing compulsory worship of Daniel’s God is very much like that of Nebuchadnezzar’s, primarily respecting intervening power and might. Once again it is at the level of “signs and wonders,”—yet at least it got the king’s attention, and others... Then again, what of the instant punishment meted out on the schemers?

“And then... the story of the lions’ den. The Apocrypha has a very interesting story there. I don’t know whether I should tell too many of these, but it sometimes suggests the quality of part of the Apocrypha. You know how Daniel got nourishment when he was in the lion’s den? There is a very interesting story of how a prophet was preparing his lunch over in Palestine, and the angel came and said, “The Prophet Daniel needs this stew you are preparing.”

“The prophet said, “He’s welcome to it, but how would he get it?”

“And so the angel took the prophet by his hair, and the prophet held the pot in his hand, and the prophet and the pot were delivered air mail to Babylon, and lowered over the lion’s den. You can see him drawing up his feet as he got closer and closer to the lions. And Daniel very gratefully partook of the stew, and the prophet and the pot were delivered back to his home. Imagine a Sabbath School lesson on that story!” A Graham Maxwell. (A rather hair-raising report?)

Thursday’s lesson: “A man was studying the Bible with his young daughter. After he told her how much he wanted her to love the Lord, she asked, ‘Daddy, would you force me to love God if you could?’ What would you answer, and why?”

What are the real consequences of choosing against God? How does it really work?

Ellen White Comments

Fallen angels feared that his influence would weaken their control over the rulers of the kingdom, for Daniel was high in command. The accusing host of evil angels stirred up the presidents and princes to envy and jealousy, and they watched Daniel closely to find some occasion against him that they might report him to the king; but they failed. Then these agents of Satan sought to make his faithfulness to God the cause of his destruction. Evil angels laid out the plan for them, and these agents readily carried it into effect.

The king was ignorant of the subtle mischief purposed against Daniel. With full knowledge of the king's decree, Daniel still bows before his God, "his windows being open." He considers supplication to God of so great importance that he would rather sacrifice his life than relinquish it. On account of his praying to God, he is cast into the lions' den. Evil angels thus far accomplish their purpose. But Daniel continues to pray, even in the den of lions. Was he suffered to be consumed? Did God forget him there? Oh, no; Jesus, the mighty Commander of the hosts of heaven, sent His angel to close the mouths of those hungry lions that they should not hurt the praying man of God; and all was peace in that terrible den. The king witnessed his preservation and brought him out with honors. Satan and his angels were defeated and enraged. The agents he had employed were doomed to perish in the same terrible manner in which they had plotted to destroy Daniel. {1T 295-6}

Extra Material

Love me or... I remember talking with Rebekah one time and she asked me, "But which God, Daddy? The nice one, or the nasty one?"

For so much of the time down through the ages, the church has been saying that with God there is no real freedom. You do what He says, and that's that. No other way. The only alternative... well we don't want to think about that!

Which can be puzzling to some. As if God were saying to Adam and Eve: "Look, here's the choice: do exactly as I say or... death!" Some choice! they may have remarked. Hobson's choice—named after a horse trader in Cambridge who would offer one horse—the choice being take it or leave it.

What kind of freedom is God offering if we see him this way? Hardly freedom at all if the only viable choice is to slavishly follow His dictates. Add to that the fact that what God most wants is our love, and the situation gets worse. Love me or I'll execute you? Is that the message? Or is the choice God gave to Adam and Eve the choice to follow Him or to have the inevitable consequences of going their own way?

Tragically even God's special people came to portray him as a legalistic and hostile deity who demanded strict adherence to minute regulations defined by His earthly representatives.

Why did Jesus come? Jesus answers: "I have come into the world as a light, so that no-one who believes in me should stay in darkness. The truth will set you free." John 12:46, 8:32. Christ came to show what God was really like—that He was primarily concerned with freedom, and to set humanity free from the slavery to sin. In fact, that is Christ's opening statement in His manifesto - quoting from Isaiah 61 to proclaim freedom for the prisoners. (Luke 4:18). And if the son sets you free, you will be free indeed. (John 8:36).

Free from what to what? Free from the *compulsion* that sin truly is, the force that the Devil uses in his programme of lies and deception. Free from this self-centred way of living which is in reality a way of dying. Free from ourselves—our own worst enemy. Free to choose—to choose the God who values nothing higher than the freedom of His created beings. Free to follow the best advice - the advice of our Maker which we find to be true and trustworthy. Free to love God—which we cannot do while we are busy loving ourselves, - free to love from an open and honest heart that willingly and freely agrees that God is truly right.

The choice is not "Do as I say, or else!" It is a plea from a heart of love that will *not* interfere with our freedom to choose, saying "Look at the evidence. Believe what I tell you, because you can see that it is proved true. Come to me and find healing from sin, comfort for your pain, and an eternal life together with me. Come - for if you don't, I cannot help you -and you will experience what sin does to you: utter self-destruction." It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. (Gal.5:1) A freedom that lasts forever, which is restricted only by our choosing, knowing that the way chosen by Lucifer can never lead to true happiness and individual fulfilment. Only with God can we be truly free. Forever free.

7. Daniel's History Lesson

Texts: Daniel 7.

Quotes:

- (To God): Do you think I would want to spend one more minute, let alone eternity, in your company? You allow people to suffer, sometimes for their entire lives, for no purpose, and then judge them on their reaction. You hide yourself from the world and allow your creations to persecute each other over differing interpretations of the lack of evidence. You see all the pain and ignorance caused in your name, and just sit there... And then you have the audacity to punish good people for believing in you 'for the wrong reasons'? *Adrian Barnett, An Atheist on Judgment Day*
- Do you not observe that it [religion] is an ineradicable and innate defect of our and every other civilization, that it imposes on children, who are driven by instinct and weak in intellect, the making of decisions which only the mature intelligence of adults can vindicate? *Sigmund Freud*

Introductory questions

Why was it important for Daniel to receive this dream? What was so upsetting about it? How is the Great Controversy revealed in what Daniel saw? While the details of prophetic interpretation preoccupy some, what is the primary message here? Why does God permit these horrific events to occur? How is the devil unmasked?

Discussion ideas

Now it is Daniel's turn to have a dream. This is actually back in time to Belshazzar's reign. It's interesting, knowing what will happen to B., that God should send Daniel a dream at this time. It is clearly concerning future events, and very much to do with decisions and judgment (the court motif). In the light of the previous dream (Daniel 2) it is not too hard to see that the major empires are once again identified. Perhaps this is to encourage Daniel in a hard time as Belshazzar refuses to acknowledge the true God. However the end result is that Daniel is troubled, disturbed, and his face turns pale. He obviously recognized the implications of what his dream might mean for the people of God. The encouragement from the watcher is "But the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever--yes, for ever and ever." (v. 18 NIV).

Daniel does not ask regarding the first three kingdoms. He can perhaps identify the parallels with the previous dream. But he does ask regarding the fourth kingdom, which is "different from all the others." Rome's primary difference is its morphing into a religio-political power rather than continuing as a pagan kingdom. It is this latter power that is "most terrifying," and its horn makes war on the saints. And it is this supplanting power that speaks against the Most High and seeks to change times and laws. In this clear parallel of the experience of Lucifer in wanting to be like the Most High we see the Great Controversy clearly revealed. When one remembers the experience of Christians under persecution by the state or by fellow Christians, the devil's agenda is laid bare. It is hard to believe that believers were killed for simply preaching the truth, or for possessing a Bible, or for daring to challenge human authority, but this is the history under this power.

But the primary message is one of victory—that the issues in the Great Controversy will be illuminated and resolved, that the future will be one of God's eternal and beneficent kingdom.

Ellen White Comments

As a people we do not understand as we should the great conflict going on between invisible agencies, the controversy between loyal and disloyal angels. Evil angels are constantly at work, planning their line of attack, controlling as commanders, kings, and rulers, the disloyal human forces. . . . I call upon the ministers of Christ to press home upon the understanding of all who come within the reach of their voice, the truth of the ministration of angels. Do not indulge in fanciful speculations. The Written Word is our only safety. We must pray as did Daniel, that we may be guarded by heavenly intelligences. As ministering spirits angels are sent forth to minister to those who shall be heirs of salvation. Pray, my brethren, pray as you have never prayed before. We are not prepared for the Lord's coming. We need to make thorough work for eternity (The SDA Bible Commentary, Ellen G. White Comments, vol. 4, p. 1173).

I call upon you who are not ready for the last great controversy to wake up. You are not watching for that which is soon coming upon the earth. Human instrumentalities under the control of fallen angels, are seeking to gather in their harvest. Those who would find themselves under the protection of the angels of God must live wholly for God's glory, prepared to stand in their lot and in their place. They are to be faithful and true, even as Daniel was, a man called by the Lord, "greatly beloved," a man who felt the need of praying and confessing his sins. Those who do as Daniel did are not asleep, but are keenly alive to their exposure to the enemy's malignant devices. They see that their only safety is in keeping the commandments of God. They pray as Daniel prayed, confessing their sins and finding pardon. {11MR 104.2}

Extra material

Do you find the following argument regarding God's actions (particularly in the Old Testament) convincing? Is this a good way of explaining God and the judgment?

"If God were really good, how could He do such a thing? How could He destroy these innocent people? This is barbaric." [People] take this record of God's judgment as evidence that the God of the Bible isn't really good at all, and therefore should not be believed in.

"I approach it from a different direction. I think the preponderance of evidence from the same historical record—the Old Testament—is that God is good. He continually demonstrates not just his holiness, but also His patience and forbearance for those that consistently rebel against Him, though He has graciously cared for them.

"This gives us good reason to trust Him. And if we have good reason to trust Him, then when we see things that seem to go against our sense of goodness and justice, it seems only fair to give the benefit of the doubt to God, who just might know something more than we know. When we were children, our own parents acted in ways we didn't understand. We didn't think their decisions were fair. Later we learned that, for the most part, they had insight and information unavailable to us that influenced their decisions. Many times we learned that they were acting in our best interests after all, though we didn't see it at the time.

"These are the kind of things we discover as we grow up. We learn that our parents were right most of the times we thought they were off base. The same kind of hindsight is true with God. God may know a few things we don't know...

"Even if that wasn't the case, as the Author of life God still has the right to take life according to His own judgment." Gregory Koukl.

The record of history is hard to understand without the perspective of the Great Controversy. Only as we recognize that the devil is allowed to develop his agenda does it become clear that the current situation is temporary, and that "an enemy has done this."

8. The Pre-Advent Judgment

Texts: Daniel 7.

Quotes:

- God is more concerned about who you are than what you do. *Gary Gulbranson*
- Give God the margin of eternity to justify himself. *H. R. Haweis*
- Nothing hath separated us from God but our own will, or rather our own will is our separation from God. *William Law*
- To honor him whom we have made is far from honoring him that hath made us... *Michel Eyquem De Montaigne*
- Suddenly is the soul oned to God when it is truly peaced in itself: for in Him is found no wrath. *Julian of Norwich*

Introductory questions

What's the point of the pre-advent judgment? Is it to terrorize us into compliance right now, worrying that our name could come up "at any minute"? How does God the Judge come across? How should we preach the judgment? Why was Daniel so upset with this issue? Why is God's kingdom so different? Why does God not use force?

Discussion ideas

The key here is that "the books are opened" and that there is an open vindication of God and all who have followed him. In the context of the Great Controversy, there has to be a reason for all this terrible suffering and negative experience of so many, and God's involvement in all of this needs to be made clear. That's before any consideration of salvation or "fitness for heaven" etc. Most of all the deep issues of the conflict have to be exposed and the way in which God has countered the lies of the devil must be made clear. This is not just in contemporary existence, but in a final analysis. This is really what the judgment is all about. Most significantly, it is God who is on trial—the truth about his nature and character, his fitness to govern, his trustworthiness.

From Sunday's lesson: "it's crucial to keep in context the idea of the great controversy. We are not alone in the universe; the whole question of sin and evil and rebellion involve more than just humans (*see Job 1, 2; Eph. 3:10; Rev. 15:4; Rom. 8:22, 23*). Other intelligent beings, not omniscient (as is the Lord), are watching (*1 Cor. 4:9*). With this context and background in mind, we can better understand the need of an open investigation prior to judgment."

That there should be a pre-advent judgment speaks of the openness of God's government. For some, if God is God, then he can do as he pleases, no questions asked. But God wants our questions and those of all the created intelligences of the universe, inviting us to reason together with him. The process is certainly not necessary for God, for he already knows all the information. The reason is so that all others may be convinced because of all the issues in the Great Controversy that need to be illustrated and concluded. So, just because God *is* the kind of person he is, he wants all to see his reasons for his actions, why he has acted in the way he has. We also need to understand not only what others have done, but why. As always, the "why?" questions are the most important. Daniel's concerns only make sense in such a context, for even though there is the reassurance that God will finally be victorious, Daniel too wants to understand the meaning of history and why God has chosen to act as he has.

How can we share the truth about God's judgment as the truly *good* news?

Ellen White Comments

To Daniel was given a vision of fierce beasts, representing the powers of the earth. But the ensign of the Messiah's kingdom is a lamb. While earthly kingdoms rule by the ascendancy of physical power, Christ is to banish every carnal weapon, every instrument of coercion. His kingdom was to be established to uplift and ennoble fallen humanity (Letter 32, 1899)

It may be a difficult matter for men in high positions to pursue the path of undeviating integrity whether they shall receive praise or censure. Yet this is the only safe course. All the rewards which they might gain by selling their honor would be only as the breath from polluted lips, as dross to be consumed in the fire. Those who have moral courage to stand in opposition to the vices and errors of their fellow men—it may be of those whom the world honor—will receive hatred, insult, and abusive falsehood. They may be thrust down from their high position, because they would not be bought or sold, because they could not be induced by bribes or threats to stain their hands with iniquity. Everything on earth may seem to conspire against them; but God has set His seal upon His own work. They may be regarded by their fellow men as weak, unmanly, unfit to hold office; but how differently does the Most High regard them. Those who despise them are the really ignorant. While the storms of calumny and reviling may pursue the man of integrity through life, and beat upon his grave, God has the “well done” prepared for him. Folly and iniquity will at best yield only a life of unrest and discontent, and at its close a thorny dying pillow. And how many, as they view their course of action and its results, are led to end with their own hands their disgraceful career. And beyond all this waits the judgment, and the final, irrevocable doom, Depart (ST Feb. 2, 1882)! {4BC 1171}

Extra material

Judgment. You're told you have to attend a court. How you feel? Pleased, joyful, excited? As the day comes round you jump out of bed with happy anticipation and drive to the court building full of exhilaration? No, no and thrice no, right?

The whole idea of judgment is full of negative overtones in our society. The idea of God as Judge does not thrill the heart. That's because our modern system of justice tends to look at the judgment process only in terms of conviction or acquittal. But judgment systems of the past were very much concerned with not only convicting criminals, but positively vindicating the righteous. The Bible reveals God as this kind of trustworthy, admirable Judge. We can look forward to meeting our Judge because we know what he is like, and we can have complete confidence in him.

What if God were not the Judge? Would you be prepared to be judged by anyone else--the Devil maybe, or a council of angels, or a jury of twelve honest men and true? No? Why not? Is your reply something about how they don't really understand you, how you wouldn't trust them, how they do not have all the information? So from just a logical point of view, it's good that God is the Judge. Only he has access to all the information, he won't make a mistake, and he is not biased.

But it's much more than that! In ancient times, the judge was appealed to not just for an acquittal, a “Not Guilty” verdict, but for a positive affirmation of truth and right. Instead of going from the court with a verdict that you didn't do some particular crime, you could leave with a definite statement of honesty and uprightness! Which is why in the Psalms, for example, there is such an appeal to God to come in and judge, to be the arbitrator. Again and again the oppressed and afflicted cry out for justice and judgment, for vindication and comfort. The call for judgment is a call for fairness and right, someone who pleads “Come and judge me.” The judgment is about character, not just about actions.

The Pharisees were confident about the Judgment. They kept the law to the absolute letter. What they didn't realize was that God's judgment is far more involved with what kind of people they were, rather than only looking at what they did.

The confident appeal to God also says much about God. When David asked for judgment he wasn't saying “Hey God, look at me, I'm perfect!” (Just think of his life for a minute!) What he was expressing was his absolute confidence in God, how he completely trusted God in everything, especially in God's ability to always deal right with his erring children. God as Judge is totally trustworthy!

© Jonathan Gallagher 2004