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Truths for Bitter Providences, Part 21

An incredible question raised in Psalm 137. It was written from the perspective of exile.

Psalms 137:1, "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion."

As in any tragedy, there comes a time when the coping mechanism gives way to an emotional eruption; we see that here. After witnessing the horror of the exile... after walking in chains for months in which no doubt many perished along the way- loved ones, friends, neighbors, family- there came a time when many of these exile's emotions just poured out. That is what happened here... "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down...

and wept!" Why then? What caused it?

Psalms 137:2-3, "Upon the willows in the midst of it we hung our harps. For there our captors demanded of us songs, and our tormentors mirth, *saying*, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.'"

How cruel! At one point in the journey Babylonian soldiers, just to be mean, forced God's people to sing "one of the songs of Zion"- that is, one of the songs used in the worship of God! This served to remind them of all that they had lost! Now I have little doubt these Jewish slaves performed, but each inwardly felt the struggle.

Psalms 137:4: "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

If you haven't gathered it by now, we live, just like our fathers and mothers in the faith before us- "...in a foreign land." In fact, Peter using this very language began his first epistle with these words:

1 Peter 1:1a, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia..."

The language here is that of the exile with the implication that for the child of God this world is not our home. Just like those in Daniel's day, all of us in Christ remain in exile! And thus we are exhorted in Hebrews:

Hebrews 13:12-13, "Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate [in other words, in the Diaspora/the Wilderness... and what is the call?]. Hence, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach [in other words, don't fight the exile, embrace it! That now is where life will be lived for all God's people!]. For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking *the city* which is to come."

In light of this we are not to be surprised to discover that from Daniel's day forward, life in this world would not be easy for God's people.

- Each of the eras mentioned in Daniel 11 would be fraught with difficulty, hardship, and suffering for the people of God: the Persian Era, in Alexander's day, in the era of the Ptolemies and Seleucids, and in that awful time of Antiochus Epiphanes!
- And yet none of this would compare to the final era in which many antichrists would come and attack God's people (1 John 2:18) an era which would come to a climatic head with THE Antichrist who has yet to come to this earth.
- Recall the summary Daniel gave in this vision which encompassed world history from his point to the last day.

Daniel 10:1a, "In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia a message was revealed to Daniel, who was named Belteshazzar; and the message was true and *one of* great conflict..."

That conflict in the horrible reign and rule of the Antichrist. Truly, the last days are going to be hard! Speaking of the final days:

Daniel 12:1b, "...and there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time..."

Christ, quoting Daniel added this:

Matthew 24:21-22, "...there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall. And unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days shall be cut short."

From this it is quite tempting to think that for the child of God, "the one with understanding" (Daniel 12:3, 10), life therefore will be lived in sorrow, sadness, doom, and gloom! For, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" Daniel 12 answers that question definitively:

Daniel 12:1, "Now at that time..."

What time? The time of the Antichrist! In fact, the expression could be translated, "During that time..." So though we read of the death of the Antichrist in Daniel 11:45, nevertheless in Daniel 12 we are back to the suffering and struggle of the last days.

In this regard, it is interesting to note another important prophetic tool called "Progressive Parallelism." This is where an historical account or an assertion is given and then repeated with advancement in thought or detail. For example David wrote:

Psalms 29:1-2, "Ascribe to the Lord, O sons of the mighty, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to His name; worship the Lord in holy array."

It is like the rising tide on the beach- the same wave seemingly comes again and again, but each time there is an advancement. We see that here in Daniel 11/12. Daniel 11:36-45 describes the final days bringing us up to the time when the Antichrist dies. But then Daniel 12 starts describing the same history at an earlier time, but then brings it past the point where Daniel 11 left off. Hence the name, "Progressive Parallelism."

In fact, the book of Revelation contains this same pattern. It is easy to assume that because

Revelation is a book containing history, the whole thing must proceed chronologically with the contents of the latter chapters occurring after earlier chapters. Yet this is an assumption which leads to some serious interpretive problems. A better analysis of the book reveals that Revelation contains seven distinct sections which chronologically are parallel to each other. Each of the seven sections basically covers the same era, yet they progress the story further each time. And so:

- Section #1 (chapters 1-3): We see the Church as it exists in the current age.
- Section #2 (chapters 4-7): We see the same history but this time viewed from the perspective of God's Throne. In this vision we see the church suffering trial and persecution against the background of the victory of Christ. Metaphor: Seven Sealed Scroll
- Section #3 (chapters 8-11): Once again we have the same history, but now the church is avenged, protected, and victorious. Metaphor: Seven Trumpets
- Section #4 (chapters 12-14): We have the same history as seen from the perspective of Christ, His coming, and His people. Here we are introduced to the beast out of the sea and the beast out of the earth.
- Section #5 (chapters 15-16): Once again we have the same history with an emphasis on the wrath of God and its devastating effects upon mankind. Metaphor: Seven bowls of Wrath
- Section #6 (chapters 17-19): The same history as before with an emphasis on the fall of Babylon and of the beasts. Here the dragon's two helpers, the two beasts, are punished.
- Section #7 (chapters 20-22): Finally we have the same history but now progressing to the final judgment, the final triumph of Christ and his church, and the new heavens and earth.

From all of this I want you to see that while Satan is persecuting the people of God mercilessly (Daniel 11:36-45), nevertheless the child of God will NOT be in despair (Daniel 12:1-4). Rather, he will be characterized by joy, hope, and even optimism!

Philippians 4:4-5: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your forbearing *spirit* be known to all men. The Lord is near."

Peter exhorted the exiled Christians of his day that they must always be ready,

1 Peter 3:15b, "...to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you..."

Nehemiah 8:10: "...the joy of the Lord is your strength."

Though we are in a foreign land, it not only is possible to "sing the song of Zion," it is

expected of us! How is that possible?

Matthew 5:10-12a, “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when *men* cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad [in persecution... trial... exile], for your reward in heaven is great...”

What is the “reward” referenced here that transforms “the valley of mourning into a spring”? That is the focus of Daniel 12:1-4 which could be summarized as, “*When life in this state of sin and misery gets to the worst that is when you are on the verge of the very best!*”

Daniel gives us six reasons for hope in the midst of sorrow. Notice the first reason we have hope in the midst of sorrow is because we have the promise of God’s sovereign protection.

Daniel 12:1, “Now at that time Michael [whose name means, ‘who is like God?’], the great prince who stands *guard* over the sons of your people, will arise...”

What an interesting statement! We are talking here about Michael, the Archangel of the Lord! We were introduced to him in Daniel 10:13, 21 where the focus was more on the angel Gabriel and his ministry to Daniel- and so we really didn’t talk much about him then.

So who is “Michael”? Gabriel told Daniel this about Michael:

Daniel 10:13a, “But the prince of the kingdom of Persia was withstanding me for twenty-one days; then behold, Michael, ONE of the CHIEF PRINCES, came to help me...”

This text indicates that Michael was “one of many” angels whom God created to rule/lead in the outworking of the Lord’s redemptive will.

The word for “prince” is **שָׂר** (*śar*) which carries the connotation of “ruling” or “holding dominion over something.” As such, in the Bible it denotes leaders, captains, or chieftains. It was a word used in the military in reference to a commander. It also was a religious term denoting the heads of the classes or courses of priests (Ezra 8:24). It could be used of tribal heads (1 Chronicles 27:22). The term primarily refers to “the leader”- the “one in charge.” And so, for example, Joseph had dealings with Potiphar, the prison warden, the chief butler, and the chief baker- all four of which were identified with this term, **שָׂר** (*śar*)- because they were the leaders (Genesis 39:1, 21; 40:2).

Here it is modified by the term, “chief” (a word for “first” or “head”) which indicates that Michael was created to be a leader of the leaders in heaven. He is “one of the chief princes” in glory. How “chief”? What’s his rank?

Jude 9a, "But Michael the archangel, when he disputed with the devil and argued about the body of Moses, did not dare pronounce against him a railing judgment..."

The term used here is "archangel" which indicates that Michael not only is one of many "leaders of leaders" in heaven; he is the Chief Leader! In other words, he is the one in charge! He is at the head of all angelic hosts! As such we read this:

Revelation 12:7a, "And there was war in heaven, Michael and HIS angels waging war with the dragon..."

Clearly Michael is the chief angel in heaven and so THE chief general of God's armies! While Satan and his demons want to overrun the earth to dominate God's people, Michael doesn't allow it! That is why when Gabriel, a lesser angel, was having problems with the demon whom Satan assigned over the region in which Persia resided, it was "Michael" who came to the rescue (Daniel 10:13)!

In this context, we inquire as to his calling or purpose, with what has God charged this angel?

Daniel 12:1a, "Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands *guard* over the sons of your people, will arise..."

Do you understand what is implied by this description? Michael, and so his hosts, has been charged by God to "stand guard" over the body of Christ!

What is implied by this? The word for "stand guard" in the Hebrew is *אָמַד* (*āmad*) which primarily means "to stand" or "support" (as in the pillars of a temple which never leave or rest). In this context it indicates that Michael has been commissioned by God to stand watch over the body of Christ and so to protect it from attack. Think of the watchman of a city! Notice further what Gabriel told Daniel:

Daniel 10:21b, "...yet there is no one who stands firmly with me against these *forces* except Michael YOUR prince."

This doesn't imply that Michael was Daniel's personal protector, but the personal protector of the people of God-, or in the words of Daniel 12:1, "the sons of your people"! He ever and always stands watch over God's people to protect them from Satan and his demon's devices! Now on account of the many passages which exhort the child of God to be aware of Satan and his devices (e.g., Ephesians 6:10-20; Revelation 12:11), we do NOT conclude that Michael is doing a bad job at protecting the body of Christ. RATHER we are impressed with:

- The calling and obligation that rests upon us to clothe ourselves with the spiritual armor of God (Ephesians 6), and with
- How awful it would be if God withheld the angelic protection which currently preserves His people. In fact, many believe that is what is in mind in 2 Thessalonians 2:

2 Thessalonians 2:6-7, “And you know what restrains him now , so that in his time he may be revealed. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains [which could very well be Michael] *will do so* until he is taken out of the way.”

In hearing this it is quite natural to think little of this promised protection. After all, what is it that Christ said at the end of the Great Commission, “...and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20b)? Truly, that is the ultimate in terms of comfort and protection- our ever present Savior! Yet let me ask you this: If in a war you had an invisibility cloak that would always keep you hidden and so protected from the bad guys, would there be NO comfort in the knowledge that before the enemy could get you, they’d first have to:

- Cross a very large body of water?
- Pass through a desert?
- Ford a very large river?
- Traverse a bitterly cold mountain range?
- Get past an elite task force of soldiers who have been charged with your protection?
- Breach the massive walls of your city- something that has never been done?
- Actually locate your house? Breach its walls?
- Get past the guards stationed throughout the compound?

Would your comfort only be in your invisibility cloak? I say, “No!” While the invisibility cloak is enough to protect you, you would derive comfort in knowing of the many things that were in place that would prohibit a successful attack! And so... while Christ ultimately is our consolation, protection, and joy in life and death, nevertheless the knowledge that God has commissioned His angelic hosts with your protection serves the glorious purpose of confirmation. Elisha could have just told his servant this: Don’t worry; God is with us! But instead he prayed thus:

2 Kings 6:17, “Elisha prayed and said, ‘O Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.’ And the Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.”

No wonder why Elisha was so confident in the face of death! In fact, just prior to this, Elisha told his frightened servant:

2 Kings 6:16, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them."

God was indeed with them! But how comforting to see that that promise is multifaceted and includes the glorious presence and protection of the angels! The Psalmist speaking of the Lord's care with regard to the child of God wrote:

Psalms 91:11-12, "For He will give His angels charge concerning you, to guard you in all your ways. They will bear you up in their hands, lest you strike your foot against a stone."

The Hebrew writer speaking of the angels which are led by Michael wrote:

Hebrews 1:14, "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?"

And so as dark and cold as this world may seem or become, there ever and always is a highly trained army stationed between us and the devil who do not sleep and so never weary! Accordingly, in the words of Paul, as Christians:

2 Corinthians 4:8-9, "*We are* afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."

So in the valley we are encouraged because we know we are never alone! Not only is Christ with us, but God has stationed a Holy army to watch over us to protect and so defend us!