

Book Keeping

In the name of him whose words will never pass away, dear friends in Christ: Today's Old Testament reading is a small portion of a vision of the future that God gave to the prophet Daniel. In that vision, the Lord showed Daniel the whole sweep of world history from the time when he was living, about 600 B.C., all the way up to and including the final judgment of all people that will take place on the Last Day. It's that last scene we heard described in the lesson. It's the concluding part of his vision, and Daniel watches as the heavenly court is assembled and the venerable Judge takes his seat on a fiery chariot throne. He is flanked by vast thousands of attendants and servants who do his bidding. An even larger multitude stands before him to be judged. Then, once the Judge is seated and the court is in session, the books containing the charges and evidence against the accused are opened and the trial begins.

It's a rather fearsome portrait of the judgment on the Last Day that Daniel describes; and I want to stress that it is a *picture*, a *prophetic image* of coming events given to us in highly symbolic language. We know this because earlier in this same extended vision, Daniel sees the successive empires of the world pictured as various creatures. First, he saw a noble-looking winged lion, then a ravenous and destructive bear, followed by a four-headed leopard with wings, and finally there appeared before him a terrifying beast with teeth of iron and ten horns on its head. These creatures were representations of the ancient empires of Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome, and each creature symbolically revealed something of the empire's character that it represented. The thing to see is that the creatures are not to be understood literally; they are merely symbols of various nations.

In the same way, when we get to the judgment scene, we understand that it's a symbolic picture given to us in order to communicate spiritual realities. It's not intended to be a precise description of the coming judgment. God is not really a white-haired old man in a glowing robe, sitting in a burning chair with wheels. Nor does he need a book to remind him of the charges against us – he knows everything. Instead, we are given this vivid picture to hold in our minds so that we can immediately draw from it a number of truths about the coming judgment.

For example, the thrones being set in place suggest that something extremely important is about to happen. Someone with great authority is about to hold court – someone whose authority is over all the kings of the earth. We find out it is the One Daniel calls the Ancient of Days: the one who has existed from eternity past and who will exist forever – it can only be God. His white clothing speaks of purity and holiness. From them we can be sure that his judgments will be righteous. His white hair also suggests the wisdom that comes with age. He's been around; he's seen every trick in the book. No one is going to pull one over on him, or get off on a technicality.

His throne is a fiery chariot. It suggests a number of things: ancient kings used chariots for leading their forces into war. From them they would vanquish their foes, and to them their soldiers would bring the captured enemy leaders after the battle. There the chariot served as a judgment seat. That's where the defeated leaders would learn of their fate. That the chariot is ablaze with fire and that a river of fire comes out from underneath it suggests anger: the burning wrath of God. It points to God's perfect law that flows out from him and burns up all that is impure and unholy. It also points to the final end of those found guilty by the court and prefigures how they will spend all eternity in the lake of fire.

Also, in the vision, Daniel sees an incalculable number of angelic hosts standing in attendance around the Lord. It is they who have gathered up the billions of people who now stand before the throne waiting to be judged. The indication is that this might take some time; but hey, we've got all eternity at this point, so even though the mill of God's justice may grind slowly, sooner or later each person, *every person*, will take his or her turn in the seat of the accused. And somewhere deep down inside, I think we all know that. Whether we are Christians or not, I think it's part of all of mankind's intuitive consciousness, this knowledge that one day we will

be called to account for what we have done, whether good or bad. As sure as we all have a general understanding of right and wrong, we know that one day justice will be served.

And this brings us to the books that will be opened before the court. They contain a perfect record of everything each person has done. They tell the whole story: every sin, every lie, every violation of the law, every failure to love God and your neighbor as the holy commandments require ... no matter how small the violations, no matter how secret they may have been, sins long forgotten ... each episode recorded in precise and damning detail. And not just what was done outwardly, but also the dark motives behind every action, and even the shameful and selfish thoughts that weren't acted upon; *all* are part of the record, and *all* are to be presented in evidence before the court. You know, we live in a culture that has largely lost its sense of shame. On that day we're going to get it back in spades. Imagine standing there before the Lord God and all his holy angels – not to mention everyone else – and having every evil thing you've ever done, said, or thought revealed. ... What's written in the book about *you*?

That's one frightful book, isn't it? But of course, we understand that it's a symbol of God's perfect memory about you. And that's what makes this book so terrifying: every word of it is absolutely true. There's no way for you to deny any of it. It's all based on the Judge's eyewitness testimony. It's the result of his completely honest book keeping and chronicling of your life. It's the absolutely accurate, incontestable documentary evidence that can only condemn you. The question is: what do you do about it?

And the most common answer that people come up with is to try to forget that the book exists, or at least go on living their lives pretending that it doesn't. Call it basic denial. We can do this either by avoiding thoughts about the coming judgment (a lot of people do that), or by refusing to truthfully confront the evidence being compiled against us. We minimize it, pretend like it's not that serious, or console ourselves by assuming that we'll look pretty good compared to others whom we believe will be in worse shape. We get a lot of help in this regard too, because Satan wants to suppress your knowledge that the book exists. His goal all along has been to suppress the truth of what that book has to say about you. One way or another, he tries to hide its contents from all people.

I think I've used this illustration before, but in keeping with Daniel's method of portraying spiritual truths through pictures, Satan's approach to deceiving people in this way reminds me of the classic science fiction story by Ray Bradbury entitled *Fahrenheit 451°*. The story is a dark vision of a future in which a powerful central government has outlawed all books because, they say, of the dangerous ideas they contain. They want to control people by controlling their thoughts. They are afraid of creativity, independent thought, and ideas that might cause conflict or rebellion. So they carefully control and monitor all information and entertainment that goes out to people. They want to make sure that everyone thinks the same way – their way. That's how they guarantee peace and tranquility in society – by total uniformity in thinking. So all books and other forms of literature have been declared illegal in order to prevent the spread of unapproved and potentially dangerous ideas.

Now, the main character in the story is a fireman; but not like the firemen we think of; no, in this twisted society a fireman is someone who burns books. It happens that some people, old timers mostly, cherish their books and keep them hidden away so they can read them secretly. Whenever such a person is found out – usually betrayed by nosy or suspicious neighbors – the firemen come, with the fire trucks, coats, hats, axes, and all, and they knock down the doors, tear the house apart looking for hidden books, and then they take them out in the yard and burn them. And that explains the book's title: 451° Fahrenheit is the temperature at which paper spontaneously ignites and burns.

Well anyway, our hero, the fireman, is a guy just doing his job; and he does it well. He really doesn't think about it much. He's been told that books are bad, that they should be burned, and that those who read books are criminals. He believes all of it. But one day something goes wrong. Called out on a job, they find an old fellow who has a whole library hidden in a secret room in his house. There must be thousands of books in there. Rather than go through all the effort of taking them all out, they decide to burn the books in place, house and all. The problem is that the old guy won't come out. He'd rather burn up with his library than live without it – and because he won't leave, that's exactly what happens.

This gets our fireman to wondering what it is about books that someone would be willing to die so horrible a death rather than live without them. The thought nags at him until, you guessed it, on a later job when taking some books out to be burned, he makes sure no one is looking, and he slips one, a small one, into his fireman's jacket ... And so begins the opening of his mind to new ideas. Alone, at home, when he reads the book, he finds that he really enjoys it. He experiences feelings and thoughts he never imagined. He reads it again and again – and each time he gets more out of it. He can't understand what's so bad about a little book like this. Instead, he finds it transforming him, giving him the capacity to think in ways that he couldn't before. He's struck by the feeling that he has opened the door to a different world altogether ... and he thinks of that old man who burned up with his library ... all those books ... all those voices of people sharing their stories, ideas, feelings ... no wonder, he realizes, that the man didn't want to live without them.

Well, before long, our fireman has his own small library of books that he secretly picked up on various jobs. But he's living a double life. He has to pretend everything is normal as he goes about doing his duty – but it's not. He's being changed from the inside. And he recognizes the moral dilemma he's in: to get books he must burn books, and it's getting harder for him to do that. For every book he manages to rescue, he finds himself wondering more and more about what treasures he's destroying.

The tension of this double life increases until the authorities start to suspect him, and they begin closing in. He becomes the hunted rather than the hunter. Realizing that the gig is up, he makes contact with a mysterious underground organization, and with their help he narrowly escapes to a different place beyond the reach of the tyrannical government. It's a secret place where people like him have been taking refuge for some time. Here people love books, especially the classics of literature; but because they fear that the long arm of the authorities may eventually catch up to them, they don't have any books that can be burned. Instead, each individual becomes a book; that is, they commit it to memory. The entire community is a living library; each person actually assumes the identity of a book. The title becomes their name. And when someone wants to hear that book, they go to the person who has memorized it, and they sit and listen while he or she recites it. Children learn their books from older people, so that the books will live on even when people die. (And you've got to admit, it's a *novel* solution – no pun intended. Just the same, I'd hate to be the one picked to memorize some huge tome like *War and Peace*. No, give me a nice, short story by Mark Twain, or something like that. Of course, with my luck, I'd get the dictionary. Unabridged.)

Okay, it's just a story, and maybe you're wondering what it has to do with today's message. But I think that there are a lot of interesting parallels to our own situation today. We live in a world where the truth of a certain book is considered dangerous: that is, the book of God's memory that chronicles all of our offenses. And if you'll allow me to make the jump, it's the Holy Scriptures. That's a record of the sins of God's people: when we read about idolaters, murderers, fornicators, and the ungrateful, grumbling, unfaithful Israelites, and all the rest of them, *we are reading about ourselves*. All of them represent each of us, because we are all guilty of exactly the same things they are.

Satan and your own sinful flesh would like to suppress that truth, either by leading you to believe that the judgments that fell on those people are not going to happen to you, or by convincing you that you are somehow better than those people, or the simplest way: by getting you to avoid thinking about the Holy Book altogether. But, like the fireman in the story, you've been hooked. Though you've been warned it's dangerous, though you've been accused of going against the flow and thinking you're better than everyone else because you're a Christian, you are still being drawn by the Book ... a book for which many have gladly died rather than live without.

And this is Book transforming the way you think. It's changing you from the inside. First it reveals to you just how bad your situation really is. In every story of sin and deceit, you see yourself. You see the charge sheet against you growing longer and longer. And you see the terrifying wrath of God pouring out like fire against you for all those sins. But you keep looking deeper into the story, because there's something else there ... a new idea ... something else in God's memory that causes him to not to behave like you think he should – as his justice demands. We read, "*He does not treat us as our sins deserve*." Inexplicably, it seems, we find mercy, and forgiveness, and peace with God. And, of course, as we continue to read, we discover the mystery resolved in Christ Jesus, who endured the fiery, burning wrath of God for us. The memory of his

Son's sacrificial death on a cross, on which the record of your sins was burned up, extinguishes God's anger, so that only his love remains.

Now, like the fireman who had his mind enlightened, we find that we are not at home in the normal world. We find ourselves increasingly in conflict with it. So we escape to a different place – not physically, but spiritually. A place where people keep the book ... where they are in the process of internalizing the Book – where their very identity is being subsumed, like everyone else here, and all who have gone before us – that great cloud of witnesses – into the book of God's testimony.

But this Book is unlike any other, because it is the living Word of God. And God's Word is not a thing; it's a person. The Word of God was made flesh and dwelt among us. The Word is Jesus Christ who enters our reality by means of the printed Word on paper. By losing our sinful identity in him and trusting that he bore our disgrace on the cross, we gain his life in ourselves – and so, we will be able to stand in his holiness and innocence when we come before the judgment seat of God. When God looks at your book, he won't see your sins; instead, he will see the story of his Son. So, by keeping this Book in life, it will keep you in death, in the judgment, and in the life everlasting, because it will keep you in Christ Jesus our Lord – to whom be our thanks and praise forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!