

Christian Intelligence Daniel 11:33-34

From John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Daniel*, trans. Thomas Myers (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin Translation Society, 1843), Vol. II, 326-330, 332-334, emphasis added; English updated.

Daniel 11:33-34 “And those of the people who understand shall instruct many; yet for many days they shall fall by sword and flame, by captivity and plundering. Now when they fall, they shall be aided with a little help; but many shall cleave to them with flatteries.”

. . . The simple sense is, “Those who shall be wise among the people shall teach many.” Here the Prophet, under the angel’s guidance, predicts the multitude of apostates as well as the existence of some of an opposite character, who should retain the people within the pure worship and fear of God. Without doubt, he speaks specially of the priests. The greater part were defaulters, and they implicated the foolish vulgar people in their wickedness. . . .

The angel here allows the existence of some wise men among the people; I do not restrict this entirely to the priests, although I suppose the angel to begin with them. A small portion of them taught the truth, and God joined a party with them, but yet the angel predicts the existence of another remnant. Yet afterwards, in the second place, he embraces others who were truly proficient in God’s law, and although the obligations of the priesthood did not bind them, yet they labored to recall the wandering into the way of salvation.

He says, then, *Whoever should be skillful should teach many*. There is also here a tacit contrast between the honest servants of God and those **fictitious [false] teachers who pride themselves on their titles**; as we observe an instance of this in these days in the Papacy. For bishops and cardinals, abbots and pretenders of this kind, strut about with insolence and stupefy the miserable vulgar [the masses]. What? do not we represent the Church? Is not judgment with us, as well as the interpretation of the Law and of Scripture? As, therefore, in these times these impostors arrogate to themselves all knowledge and wish to be thought equal to the angels, so we know it came to pass among the ancient people.

The Prophet, therefore, here chastises that foolish confidence by saying, *Those who shall be understanding among the people*; meaning, the truly wise. As if he had said, those masked hypocrites acquire reputation for themselves, but without the slightest reason.

Intelligence defined

God considers those only intelligent who remain in the pure doctrine of His Law, and practice piety with simplicity and sincerity. Hence he calls these, *the intelligent among the people*.

He repeats the word “people,” in the same sense as before, implying that all who use this name are not true Israelites before God, as true knowledge of Him is required. What kind of knowledge or skill is meant, we easily ascertain from the next verse. For **all knowledge which men think they possess without this acquaintance with God, is nothing but vanity**.

These, therefore, *shall teach many*. This prediction of the angel not only asserts the existence of some among the people who should remain constant amidst such grievous assaults, and should preserve the integrity of their faith, but says they should be the directors of others; as if he had said, God will grant to each of His elect, not only the power of a bold resistance and of preserving himself pure and uncontaminated amidst every corruption, but at the same time He will render these good men the supporters of others, either in preventing their decline, or if they have fallen off, in bringing them back into the right path.

The promised remnant

Lastly, the angel signifies **how small a seed God should preserve in His Church as the teachers and rulers of others**, though but few in number; as Isaiah says, God shall consume His people, but that consumption should leave some remnant, and then it shall flow forth (Isaiah 10:22). The sentiment of this passage is the same; even if many should degenerate and depart from the faith, and this spirit should extend to the whole people, yet some few should stand firm—perhaps ten in a thousand—and these should be God’s ministers in gathering together a new Church; and thus the land which was formerly sterile, should profit by this irrigation and produce new seed.

The importance of the discipleship of ignorant Christians

Those, therefore, who shall be wise among the people shall teach many. While the angel is here predicting the future, **we ought to take to ourselves this admonition: the more each of us becomes a proficient in the faith, the more he ought to exert his utmost endeavors to teach his rude and ignorant neighbors according to this exhortation of the angel.** God does not stretch forth His hand to us to lead each of us to follow his own course, but to assist others and to advance their spiritual progress. We read therefore here, a condemnation of the slothfulness of those on whom God has bestowed much knowledge and faith, when they fail to use the trust committed to them for the edification of their brethren.

God calls us to be strenuous warriors for the truth.

This prediction of the angel ought to influence each of us, as a law and rule, to seek the profit of his brethren according to the measure of his *intelligence*. The angel adds—these should not be teachers of shadows, who prescribe men’s duty at their ease, and dispute without inconvenience, danger, or personal trouble, about what is right in itself and pleasing to God, but **they should be strenuous warriors for the truth.** Here, therefore, the angel joins his instruction with fortitude, as by this measure it would overcome all dangers, anxieties, and terrors. The passage becomes, in this way, most useful to us in these days, if we only learn to reflect on what God delivers to us by His angel and His prophet Daniel.

In conclusion then, the angel demonstrates how God never approves of any teachers as true and legitimate, unless they deliver their message as if ready to defend it, and prepared to seal it with their blood whenever it shall be necessary.

We must read the two clauses together, *Those who teach many the worship of God shall fall by the sword and the flame*; meaning, they would rather fall or perish a hundred times by the sword and the flame than desist from their office of teaching. Besides, the angel here mentions the various kinds of death, for the sake of exhortation; for, had he

mentioned only *the sword*, he would not have fully expressed the usefulness of this instruction. Whatever teachers God sets over His Church, they are not fully proved in the discharge of their duty by overcoming a single form of temptation, but they must contend with foes on the right hand and on the left, and must not allow the variety of their perils to weaken either their constancy or their fortitude. If the sword threaten them on one side, and fire on the other—if they must suffer the spoiling of their goods and banishment from home, nevertheless these teachers must persevere in their course. We observe, then, the multiplicity of conflicts here enumerated by the angel, to teach us the strength of the grace of the Spirit in supporting the teachers and rulers of the Church, and in preventing them from yielding to any temptations while contending even with the sword, and fire, and exile, and the spoiling of their goods.

He adds, *And that too for many days*. This circumstance possesses great weight, as we observe many endure for a time with a manly and intrepid courage, who afterwards languish, and then vanish away and become utterly unlike their former selves. The angel, however, here promises to those who should be sustained by the Spirit of God an invincible constancy. They should gather fresh courage for fresh conflicts, not only for a single day, or month, or year, but it should never fail them. . . .

He adds next, *And when they shall fall, or shall have fallen, they shall be strengthened, or assisted, with a small help*. Without the slightest doubt, the angel here speaks of the Maccabees, by whose assistance the faithful were gathered together and *completely* separated from those apostates who had betrayed God's temple and worship. He calls the help *small*, and truly it was so. For what could the Maccabees do to resist Antiochus? The powerful influence of this king is well known; and what was Judea when compared with Syria? The Jews indeed had destroyed their own power; we have already seen how they violated treaties, and corrupted the majority of their own people. There was neither skill, nor plan, nor concert among them. *The help, then, was small*, which God sent them. But then the angel shows how God would afford succor to His people when in distress, and allow them some alleviation from the cruelty of the tyrant.

He adds next, *Many shall join themselves to them by flatteries*. Even from this small number the angel cuts off the greater part, and informs them of the miserable condition of the Church, because very few should dare to oppose the madness of the tyrant, and out of these few many should be hypocrites.

The whole of this chapter must be interpreted of Antiochus, and yet doubtless God wishes to promote our improvement by these prophecies. They belong equally to us; for as God governs His Church in a variety of ways, so He always sustains it under its various crosses and trials.

Besides this, the old enemy the devil, who formerly opposed the Church, is equally troublesome to us. He assails us partly by enemies without [outside the Church] and partly by enemies within [the Church]. Such teaching as this was useful, not only to the ancients, but, to us also in the present day. First of all, the angel predicts the assistance to be received by the faithful as *small*. Let us learn, then, when God wishes to succor and to help us—that He does not always exert the fullness of His power. He does not thunder from heaven and overthrow our enemies by the first stroke of His lightning; but He enables us to contend successfully with our cross, and thus we are far separated from the reprobate by our firmness in resistance. Again, from the second clause we must notice the absolute certainty of many hypocrites being found mingled with the souls of God, and when God purges His Church, but a small portion will remain sincere, just as in these days the very counterpart of this prophecy is exhibited before our eyes. The whole

Papacy is called the Church of God; we are but few in number, and yet what a mixture exists even among us? How many in these days profess attachment to the Gospel, in whom there is nothing either solid or sincere! If God should search narrowly into small Churches, still among these few, some would be found deceivers. It never has been otherwise, or shall be different until the end of the world.

Here, then, **we are admonished to desire, as far as lies in our power, the purity of the Church, and to avoid all impurity**, because, in desiring auxiliaries too eagerly on the pressure of any urgent necessity, we shall be certain to become sprinkled with many stains which may ultimately cover us with confusion. The angel doubtless here reproves a fault in the conduct of the Maccabees. Although God stirred them up to afford some consolation to His Church, their proceedings are not to be approved; for it does not follow that all their actions were praiseworthy because their cause was pious and holy. But I must defer this subject till tomorrow. . . .

We began yesterday to explain what the angel said about the future persecution of the Church, and its subsequent consolation. He first showed how all the intelligent among the people should be subject to the cruelty of their enemies, in consequence of their manly perseverance in teaching others.

We have shown how inefficient those teachers whom God has set over His Church would be, if they discharged their duties at ease and in the shade, and were unprepared to undergo all contests, and intrepidly [fearlessly] to expose their lives to a variety of dangers. This, then, is a living and efficacious method of teaching, when we do not cease to discharge our duties in the midst of sword and flame.

But, on the other hand, we must notice how much this instruction is sought for when these fatal conflicts arise. Many in these days listen to our instruction concerning Christ; only they must continue without injury or annoyance. We observe many greedily drinking in the evangelical doctrines; but yet when anything disperses the crowd they flee immediately, and with as little consideration as when they first joined the assembly. That conduct which we daily observe was equally common in former times. Clearly enough this fault has been rampant throughout all ages, and it is innate in men not only to escape the cross and all things vexatious, but especially to disclose their own infirmities, because they are unwilling to undergo any danger for the worship of God and the free confession of the truth.

This passage, then, must be noticed, since the Prophet not only exhorts the learned and the wise to instruct others, but He prescribes a rule for the infirm and unlearned, urging them to strengthen themselves against all temptations, when they see all things in confusion, and Satan plotting for the complete annihilation of piety.

As this is the angel's language, we must diligently notice the circumstances of the times, for **he was not here instituting a peaceful school, and discoursing like philosophers at their ease concerning virtue without any practical contest; but he enforces the duty of both learning and teaching, even if a variety of deaths should be placed before our eyes.**

He speaks next, as I have lately stated, the language of consolation. God shows how He would afford help to His elect, although it might possibly seem of no consequence to them. For he dwells on *the smallness of the assistance*—which literally happened. Without doubt the angel referred to Mattathias and his sons, usually called the Maccabees (1 Maccabees 2:1). A restriction is put on that help by an allusion to the

members who should prove hypocritical out of that small band. We are fully aware how the Church would be reduced in its extent, for all would not prove sound in the faith, but the majority would be drawn aside by those fallacies which the angel here calls *blandishments*. This was a very grievous trial to the faithful when they perceived their own fewness and weakness in the face of their enemies. Besides, they dared not trust those allies who had pledged their faith to them and made wonderful promises, since many were deceived by these flatteries, and abandoned the cause through lack of sincerity of mind.

We have already adverted to the usefulness of such instruction for our own times; for we ought to apply it personally to ourselves, as our circumstances are similar to those of the ancients. **Out of the great multitude of those who wish to be esteemed Christians, we observe how very few retain the pure and uncorrupted worship of God.** The Papists treat their own community, which is defiled with filth of all kinds, as the only Church; there piety is utterly subverted or else contaminated with the multitude of superstitions.

And even in that small company which has withdrawn itself from the Papal idolatries, the majority is full of perfidy and deceit. They pretend to remarkable zeal, but if you thoroughly examine them, you will find them full of deception. For if God should probe His Church to the quick [through and through], as He did some years ago in Germany, and as He may do shortly in our own case, in all these serious conflicts, and amidst these persecutions, many will boast in the bravery of their championship, and yet their zeal will quickly ooze away.

When the Lord, therefore, exercises us by methods similar to those by which He proved the ancient Church, this instruction ought always to occur to our remembrance, lest our minds should grow dull and languid.

PRAYER

Grant, Almighty God, as at this day You try the faith of Your people by many tests, that they may obtain strength from the unconquered fortitude of Your Holy Spirit. May we constantly march under Your standard, even to the end, and never succumb to any temptation. May we there join intelligence with zeal in building up Your Church. As each of us is endowed with superior gifts, so may he strive for the edification of his brethren with greater boldness, manliness, and fervor, while he endeavors to add numbers to the cause. And should the number of those who are professed members of Your Church diminish, yet may some seed always remain, until abundant produce shall flow forth from it, and such fruitfulness arise as shall cause Your name to be glorified throughout the whole world, in Jesus Christ our Lord. — Amen.