

# Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

## RADIANT ENDURANCE

Daniel 12:1-3

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Analysis by Paul Jaster

At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. 2Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. 3Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.

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## DIAGNOSIS: Grimly Sad

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Weary Anguish*

When Daniel predicts “there shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence,” from the reader’s perspective that time is NOW! Apocalyptic literature is written for people already in the midst of severe trials and tribulations: the syncretistic oppression of Antiochus Epiphanes IV, the Roman destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, the pressure to acculturate, and active persecutions in the early church.

Even in America today, some sense we are on the brink of disaster like the world has never seen before: global warming; a nuclear Iran; a severe failure of the global monetary system; a total collapse of the house of cards that capitalism, socialism, and all the other -isms are; an Arab Spring festering to become a spine-chilling, wintery storm; the “fiscal cliff” we face on January 1. No wonder many in our pews wring their hands in weary anguish, wishing that they could get this nightmare out of their heads. They wait for the next shoe to drop and say, “When, Lord when?” “When will this all happen?” “When will it all end?”

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Dark Despair***

There is a reason why we (in the northern hemisphere) read bleak apocalyptic passages as we approach the end of the church year and the winter solstice. Not only do they match the gloomy, charcoal-colored clouds that hover over communities (like my own Cleveland, Ohio, where a dreary cloudbank blankets us all winter long), but there is also that end-of-autumn sense of harvest. That is, we are reaping what we have sown. Some diagnose it as SAD, seasonal affective disorder; but it is really, SAD, sin affective disorder. All those things mentioned above have a human origin. We ARE reaping what we have sown. We created the mess we are in. We cannot blame it on someone else. Not even the devil. This is the way God’s law works. Our sins have consequences. Dark and gloomy ones. So, reap and weep.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Swallowed by Death***

In ancient Semitic literature, death is pictured as a wide, gaping mouth that swallows people. Mot (mwt), the god of death, is a maw. This signals that death is something far more than just “sleep in the dust of the earth” and more than that which stands like a grim reaper off in our far and distant future. Death consumes us now, with its darkness and despair. Death saps the energy right out of us and leaves us frozen in a funk. And ultimately death drags us down into “shame and everlasting

contempt.” Our shame, God’s contempt.

## **PROGNOSIS: Radiantly Glad**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Birth & Death of a Child***

Surprisingly, in Revelation 12 (the NT’s counterpart to Daniel 12), it is not Michael who “arises” to protect God’s people. Well...at least, not at first. The great hymn of victory in Revelation 12:10-12 does not mention one word of Michael’s battle against the deadly foe that ravenously prowls the earth to swallow all of God’s children. Rather, it is the birth...death...and resurrection of one particular child, Jesus Christ, that defeats this ancient foe and gives him no standing in God’s court, God’s heavenly court, the ultimate one. In fact, Christ’s death is portrayed as his natales, his birth, his nativity. For it is his death, his wondrous death, followed by a resurrection that snatches him away from the power of death, that does the deed that saves us.

Despite what all the iconography says, it is “the blood of the Lamb” (Jesus) and not the sword of Michael that throws the deadly accusation of the Law down, gives it no “standing” in God’s court and wins the victory. The saving victory is Jesus Christ’s, who “did not cling to life even in the face of death,” but rather surrendered completely to the life-bestowing, death-defeating faithfulness of God. God’s mercy overrules God’s judgment. That’s what this cosmic conflict is really all about: God’s mercy versus God’s judgment. Death and guilt-ridden despair have no power over us if the “sting” of God’s judgment is taken away. We die, and yet, we live.

### **Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Vulnerable, but Protected***

The prescribed treatment for SAD is light-the Light of Christ, not Michael. Michael’s role is more of a “protective” one that

kicks in both before and after Christ's victory. God's people are vulnerable. Satan, the deceiver of the whole world, is at large and can still do some deadly damage, especially as he continues to tempt us to do harm to one another and then hold us accountable for that under God's law, which is why he is called "the accuser of our comrades" (Rev. 12:10).

But the baptized take heart that this very accuser has already "been thrown down" from God's heavenly court through the cross of Christ. And that their names are already written in God's Book of Life. And that they "shall be delivered" soon in God's good time. And that God's holy angels watch over them, just as Martin Luther has us say in both our morning and our evening prayers: "Let your holy angel be with me, that the wicked Foe may have no power over me." What we suffer now are "birth pangs," says Jesus (Mark 13:8)—the agonies that arise before the birth of a much better life to come. Painful, but relatively short and temporary. Our lifetime versus God's eternity. But, also promising, hopeful, and joyful because they tell us God's pregnant timetable is on track.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Wise Radiant Endurance***

The apocalyptic call is to "endurance." Wise, radiant endurance. Following the path set by Christ, Christian people do not "cling to life even in the face of death" at the expense of other people (Rev 12:11). Nor, do they "grieve as others do who have no hope" (I Thess. 4:13). Rather, they give witness to the hope that is in them. They preach the gospel (Rev 12:11) and pray the Advent prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev 22:21).

Daniel 12:3 talks of those "who sleep in the dust of the earth" rising to everlasting life and of the faithful departed wise shining "like the brightness of the sky" and "like the stars forever." Some parents choose to take this literally and tell

their kids that those who die become the shining stars we see at night. But Jesus calls us to do our shining in the darkness of this present life, which we do by giving faithful witness to his word of promise no matter how grim things look or how dark life becomes: that “word of testimony” of which Revelation 12 speaks.

And as the twinkling lights and stars of Christmas will soon remind us, stars and lights shine the brightest when things are the darkest, including that greatest star of them all, that Bethlehem “star,” the baby Jesus. So live into your re-birth in Christ, your death and resurrection with him in Holy Baptism, your natales, your nativity, and “let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”