



The Round Church at
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A Sermon Preached
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by Mark Ashton

10p

Daniel 12

The way forward

Tonight we come to the end of a short series of sermons on the second half of this Old Testament Book of Daniel. It might seem a strange place to spend our time these January evenings as busy Twenty-First Century people. But, as we have noted before, the writers of the New Testament appear to have been much more interested in these often obscure final chapters of the book of Daniel, than they were in the lively and memorable stories of lions' dens and fiery furnaces in the first half. Indeed Jesus Himself appeared to draw heavily on this chapter in His own teaching about His return and about the end of the world. So, if Jesus learnt from this chapter, we can surely expect to. I want to encourage you, even if not a believer, to attend to what Daniel chapter 12 is teaching us.

Last week we saw (in chapter 11) how political forces, economic forces and natural forces sweep to and fro across the surface of our planet. We can observe them, but our understanding of them is limited, and our control of them minimal. So they humble us, as we human beings have to acknowledge that our own wilfulness contributes to the chaos. As that chapter ended, the vision moved beyond recorded history to a final climactic battle which will bring all history to an end. And that is where our chapter starts. ¹*At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered.* And our response has to be “At what time?” because we would so love to know when it is all going to happen. But—note:

1. “At that time . . .” “At what time?” . . .
“Don’t ask!”

because every time someone asks that question in these chapters, they get given an unintelligible answer: *Then I heard a holy one speaking, and another holy one said to him, “How long will it take for the vision to be fulfilled” . . .* ¹⁴*He said to me, “It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings.”* (Daniel 8:13-14) That doesn’t seem all that cryptic there. But in chapter 9 Daniel was praying about the seventy years prophesied by Jeremiah and about when the exile would end, and listen to the answer he got: ²⁵*“Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven ‘sevens’ [or seven weeks], and sixty-two ‘sevens’. It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble.* ²⁶*After the sixty-two ‘sevens’, the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing. The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood: War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed.* ²⁷*He will confirm a covenant with many for one ‘seven’. In the middle of the ‘seven’ he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing of the temple he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him.”* (Daniel 9:25-27) It’s just about as clear as mud, isn’t it?

Look what happens here in chapter 12: ⁵*Then I, Daniel, looked, and there before me stood two others, one on this bank of the river and one on the opposite bank.* ⁶*One of them said to the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, “How long will it be before these*

astonishing things are fulfilled?” ⁷*The man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, lifted his right hand and his left hand toward heaven, and I heard him swear by him who lives forever, saying, “It will be for a time, times and half a time”.* (We’ve had that expression before in chapter 7 verse 25 and it didn’t make any sense there either).

Daniel was puzzled, but he tried again. Perhaps he thought he would have better luck if he rephrased the question: ⁸*I heard, but I did not understand. So I asked, “My lord, what will the outcome of all this be?”* Actually the alert reader of Daniel will know to be alarmed when they hear him say that—it’s a bit like being in the company of a really boring person who always bangs on forever about some favourite subject, and you yourself know to avoid that subject at all costs; but you hear some well-meaning third party about to ask him or her about it and you want to hiss, “Don’t ask about that whatever you do, not about his hobby, or her health, or the children, or the PhD thesis, or the politics of Kazakhstan or whatever it is. Avoid that subject like the plague”. Well, had we had the opportunity, I think we might have hissed to Daniel at this point, “Don’t go there Dan, don’t push it. It will only go pear-shaped again”.

And sure enough it does: ⁹*He replied, “Go your way, Daniel, because the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end. ¹⁰Many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked. None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand”.* So far so good. But: ¹¹*“From the time that the daily sacrifice is abolished and the abomination that causes desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days. ¹²Blessed is the one who waits for and reaches the end of the 1,335 days”.* These strange time periods are impossible to link to real events that we know of from secular sources in history, or to relate to each other. God alone knows how they make sense . . . and that, I think, is the point. These numbers don’t compute, because the answer to the question that gave rise to them is beyond human calculation. We have to be humble, and acknowledge it is beyond our ken. It is the same lesson that we learnt from all that history in the previous chapter. There are not just things outside our control, but also things beyond our understanding. And as humans we have to learn to be humble—and it comes as a difficult lesson to us.

Remember, much of scripture is not a puzzle to be solved by our minds, like a wordsearch or a crossword. It is not accessible to that Da Vinci Code mindset, so appealing to the human intellect. We don’t solve it, tick it, and move on. It is much more like engaging with a great work of art—you don’t solve it, you engage with it, you don’t master it; you let it master you. The more you invest in it, the more you benefit from it.

So if we are of the code-cracking, word-searching, puzzler-solving, end-calculating mindset, we need to heed John Stott’s warning about ‘Our strange reluctance to accept that God has revealed all He intended to reveal.’ So we can’t go beyond it by being ever-so clever. We must be content with the word of God as it is, and learn from it as it is. ¹¹*“From the time that the daily sacrifice is abolished and the abomination that causes desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days. ¹²Blessed is the one who waits for and reaches the end of the 1,335 days”.* So the blessing is for the one who can wait, even if the dates don’t work out as he had calculated, even if they do stretch out beyond the expected time, from 1,290 days to 1,335 or to 2,300 evenings and mornings and who knows how much further yet? The message is clear: Don’t calculate. Don’t let’s use the Bible to our own ends—it’s not our plaything to work out our pet theories and prove our theological systems. It is God’s living voice to us. And we can’t grasp all of that. We must be content not to know everything! Trying to work it all out will not help us, because it will tempt us not to trust Him.

So let’s return to the wonderful opening paragraph of the chapter:

2. Rise and shine

¹*At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise.* Michael represents what is happening in the heavenly, supernatural, unseen world. ¹*There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then.* Daniel knew a thing or two about times of distress. He had lived through a few himself. And it must have chilled his blood to hear that there was a worse one to come. God has a way of acting at His people’s lowest point and greatest need. Did you notice that in verse 7?—*“It will be for a time, times and half a time. When the power of the holy people has been*

finally broken, all these things will be completed.” Or verse 11: *“From the time that the daily sacrifice is abolished and the abomination that causes desolation is set up.”* That’s when God will act to save His people. Have you noticed that in your life? God likes to act at our time of greatest need, when we think things are beyond recovery.

Look at verses 1-2: *At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.* Even death will not have the last word. Remember that Funeral Director who used to sign his letters—“Yours eventually”? And it is inevitable—that one date which none of us can put in our diaries but which none of us will miss—but it will not actually be the end: *²Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.* Death will defeat every one of us, believer and unbeliever alike; we are all heading to the grave. But it will not defeat God. In fact, it will work out His purposes, as some rise to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt: *²Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. ³Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.*

I don’t know if you are one of those who like a happy ending. They say American cinema audiences always prefer films with happy endings, and, when Titanic was released, one of my sons tried to convince me that they had a special version of it for the American market, in which the liner missed the iceberg and sailed on to dock safely in New York. Well, Daniel has a happy ending—and you and I are invited to trust it: that death will not have the last word—God will. He will bring the living and the dead to judgement. And we know that we can pass safely through that judgement because Jesus bore it for us when he died on the cross. *²Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. ³Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the*

heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.

Don’t calculate, says Daniel to us—do trust—and then finally—let’s look at the practical exhortation to Daniel himself with which the chapter ends:

3. Deal with it, Daniel

Actually the first instruction to him is in verse 4: *⁴“But you, Daniel, close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge.”* The words of the book of Daniel will last to the end of time. Closing up and sealing the scroll was not so much about hiding it away in secret. It was more about authorising and finalising it. The words of the book were complete and were now to be guarded and kept, just as we are told (in the New Testament) to guard the gospel.

And believers guard the gospel by proclaiming the gospel. So the words of Daniel are sealed by being taught authoritatively. That is what the wise will do (chapter 11): *³³Those who are wise will instruct many.* It’s picked up in verse 3 of chapter 12: *Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.* The wise know that God’s Word does His work in His world by His Spirit. They know that God’s revelation is sufficient and they stand firmly on it. They teach it—they ‘seal’ it in that sense. While others rush up and down seeking knowledge wherever they can: *⁴“But you, Daniel, close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge.”*

Daniel needed nothing more: *⁸I heard, but I did not understand. So I asked, “My lord, what will the outcome of all this be?” ⁹He replied, “Go your way, Daniel, because the words are closed up and sealed [they’re fixed, they’re permanent] until the time of the end. ¹⁰Many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked. None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand”.* He did not need more knowledge: God’s revelation was complete as far as he was concerned. The words were complete—they did not tell Daniel all he would have liked to know. But they told him all he needed to know. We have all we need in the gospel. Many will reject it, but

many will be transformed by it (verse 10). Our task as believers is to keep going our gospel way, by telling others of Jesus: ⁹**“Go your way, Daniel, because the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end”**. God’s word will divide people, it always has.

And so, God’s last quiet word to Daniel: ¹³**“As for you, go your way till the end. You will rest, and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance.”** He was to persevere: ¹³**“As for you, go your way till the end”**. Then there was the promise of death. ¹³**“You will rest”** after such a long and strenuous life. But beyond death, the promise of resurrection and inheritance: ¹³**“and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance”**. One commentator called this: ‘One of the most impressive assertions in the whole Bible of the importance that God places on the individual and on the individual’s destiny in God’s scheme of things’. Isn’t that a wonderful promise for you and me? We’re to go the gospel way—the way that Daniel went: ¹³**“go your way till the end. You will rest”**, death will come as a rest at the end of the energies we’ve exerted for God on earth. But it won’t be the end ¹³**“and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance.”** A gospel way to the end of our days on earth. And then just a rest in death. And then resurrection. And then inheritance. What a prospect!

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)