

Sermon Given by

Simon Scott

At the Morning Service on 5th December 2010

Daniel 11

In AD 410, the Roman Empire collapsed. The great leader of the first few centuries of church Augustine was Bishop of Hippo in North Africa at the time – the day came when he heard the news that Rome had been sacked. It's hard to imagine how devastating that news was – except when you recall that Rome was the centre of the known world and must have seemed like the centre of the universe. For centuries, this great city had dominated the Mediterranean. And now an entire civilisation had fallen to the brute force of a violent Goth and his pagan hordes.

On the day the news arrived, Augustine preached a sermon in which he compared the sacking of Rome with the destruction of Sodom. He told his congregation not to give up hope: 'There will be an end to every earthly kingdom, for this world is passing away. The world is but a breath. But do not fear. Your youth shall be renewed as an eagle.' He then spent much of the remainder of his life writing his great book on the city, which unlike Rome, can never pass away – The City of God.

It is the contrast between earthly empires which come and go and the Kingdom of Almighty God which lies at the heart of the Book of Daniel and which makes sense of the vision we are considering today in Chapter 11.

You will remember if you were here two weeks ago that the preamble to the vision which fills the last two chapters of the book took all of chapter ten. That was mainly because Daniel needed to be coaxed and cajoled onwards to receive this prophecy from the heavenly messenger.

If we find the message hard to receive, perhaps it is some encouragement that Daniel plainly found it hard as well.

But the very fact that the prophecy was given such a lengthy introductory fanfare, despite its difficulty, tells us that this message is important – even for New Testament Christians.

We've already noted in the course of the series that there are many more references to the second half of the Daniel in the New Testament than there are to the first half of the book. We are familiar with the stories of the lion's den and the fiery furnace in the first half and know almost nothing of the complicated visions and prophecies of the second half. But the New Testament writers and Jesus himself quoted from them, not so much the first half.

So what are we to learn from these verses? I want to highlight three things: God's word is true; God's ways are hidden; God wins.

1. God's word is true. Which is of course the claim of the very first sentence of our reading...² ***"Now then, I tell you the truth:***

The heavenly messenger had already told Daniel that his message was '***the book of truth***' and that claim is repeated as he begins to relay the prediction of the future. ***'I tell you the truth'***.

So what is the truth which we are told here? Well, the verses we are looking at give us a preview of the next four centuries of history. It starts of course with Daniel's own lifetime in the sixth century BC in the reign of the Persian ruler, Cyrus. The first two centuries are passed over very quickly in verses 2-4 which cover the transition from Persian rule to Greek domination after the lightning conquest of Alexander the Great. He is the mighty king of verse 3.

But Alexander had died by the age of thirty-two and exactly as verse 4 describes, the vast empire he had conquered got split up with the two main dynasties thereafter in the North - known as the Seleucid kingdom - and the South - known as the Ptolemaic kingdom, based in Egypt.

We're not going to look in detail at verses 5-20, but they relate the to-ing and fro-ing of power between the Seleucid kings and the Ptolemaic Kings, complete with military action and a soap opera of skin-deep romantic attachments.

They get much greater coverage than Alexander the Great did, for an obvious reason. The interest is of course that as Syria clashes with Egypt, inevitably they repeatedly criss-cross over another small country which happened to be in a narrow corridor between the two super-powers. It's mentioned in passing in verse 16: the Beautiful Land - a title for the land of promise which God had given to Israel.

That sets up the focus of verses 21 - 35 where we focus on the last of the Seleucid rulers, Antiochus IV, also known as Antiochus Epiphanes. To give you a sense of the passing of time, the dates of his reign were 175 BC to 164.

Not all that long. He wasn't particularly important in the big picture of Ancient Middle Eastern History - but he gets lots of coverage here, because when he wasn't able to win against Egypt, he picked instead on someone he could beat, one of the minnows, Israel, making life wretched and ugly for everyone in the Beautiful Land.

In particular there is a mention of what happened in 167 bc, when the temple with all its sacrifices was shut down for the worship of the true God and a statue of the Greek God Zeus was put on the altar.

In the language of verse 31:³¹ ***“His armed forces will rise up to desecrate the temple fortress and will abolish the daily sacrifice. Then they will set up the abomination that causes desolation.***

I hope you will forgive me for not tracing through all the events which fulfilled these predictions. It would take too much explanation of the historical happenings of these four centuries to be a helpful exercise in the time we have this morning. But the **detail** of the prediction is very striking - there is nothing vague and airy-fairy about it - and scholars are able to demonstrate the correspondence of history as it was to happen with the minute details of what was predicted centuries before.

You get the sense that if someone was reading Daniel's book in later years as they saw the different successors to Alexander the Great coming and going, they would have said to themselves: 'This is amazing! Everything is happening exactly as God has said it will.'

Why? Because of course God's word is true... What we have before us is a fantastic piece of literature *in which history was written before it took place*. There can be no other explanation for that than that this book has a supernatural origin.

It's not surprising that people have been so struck by the correspondence with the events of the second century BC that they have decided that it must have been written after the event. They have decided that... Because they rule out the possibility that God could ever predict it all in advance.

But their God is too small. The God of the Bible can certainly predict what happens in his world. He knows the end from the beginning. And when he says something is going to happen, it is no surprise when it does. His word is true. This book is trustworthy... at this point and indeed on every other topic – because God is trustworthy. In all the tweet and twitter of modern mass communication there is a word which is in a different class. A word which stands the test of time, because the one who speaks it stands outside time. God's word is true.

But let's move on to a second point which is significant in this passage.

2. God's way is hidden. This is significant, because you might easily think it calls into question the fact that God keeps his word...

The heavenly messenger gives Daniel a prediction of the future. But when we examine the historical survey he is given, there is barely any mention of God in it. A catalogue of wars, alliances, marriages, battles – endless comings and goings, with humanity taking up the whole picture.

Whoever is in power seems to call the shots – and God is not even mentioned: so it looks like history is nothing to do with him at all... Armies are crossing the Beautiful Land, Palestine, from the north and the south, with no idea at all that the people who live there, people who have the truth of God matter in the slightest. The Jews are completely overlooked. And their God is nowhere to be seen.

That becomes even more so in the section which is devoted to the contemptible ruler of verse 21-35, Antiochus IV.

Let me select from that section verses 28-32 ²⁸ ***The king of the North will return to his own country with great wealth, but his heart will be set against the holy covenant. He will take action against it and then return to his own country.***

²⁹ ***“At the appointed time he will invade the South again, but this time the outcome will be different from what it was before. ³⁰ Ships of the western coastlands^[d] will oppose him, and he will lose heart. Then he will turn back and vent his fury against the holy covenant. He will return and show favour to those who forsake the holy covenant.***

³¹ ***“His armed forces will rise up to desecrate the temple fortress and will abolish the daily sacrifice. Then they will set up the abomination that causes desolation. ³² With flattery he will corrupt those who have violated the covenant, but the people who know their God will firmly resist him.***

There is a telling phrase in verse 28 where we read: 'his heart will be set against the holy covenant.' In fact five times in as many verses the 'covenant' is mentioned. Isn't it striking that that is the phrase he uses to talk about God's people?

We are meant to say as we read that: ‘yes indeed – what about the covenant? What about God’s promise to stick with his people through thick and thin. Does the covenant count for nothing, if Antiochus IV can fight against God’s covenant people and get away with it. Why is God’s way hidden?’

I’ve already mentioned that he was given the name Epiphanes. Or rather he gave himself that name: it was itself a blasphemous title meaning ‘the shining light’. Actually he was given a nickname that mocked his own self-styled title. He was such a crack-pot he was called by some not Epiphanes, but Epimanes. The maniac.

His persecution of the Jews was a good example. Altars got used for idols – and so pigs and other unclean animals were sacrificed on them. No burnt offerings were permitted, no circumcision, no Sabbaths.

On one occasion Antiochus sent an army of 22,000 to Jerusalem. Upon arrival, the army pretended that it had come in peace – only to parade fully armed on the Sabbath and then slaughter all who came to watch.

There was a time when two women charged with not having kept the law – they’d circumcised their children. Antiochus’ troops killed the children, suspended them from their mothers’ breasts before parading them around town and throwing them over the city wall.

And brutal torture, like the occasion when seven brothers were threatened with flogging if they didn’t eat pig’s flesh and then tortured when they refused...

It’s one thing for God to predict these events, we might feel, but how come he is so conspicuously absent when they happen? I’d be amazed if that question doesn’t cross our minds when we look at our world. And for some of us it may well be the case that that is the question we have when we look at our lives. God’s way is hidden. We seem to be at the mercy of forces over which we have no control at all. What **has** happened to God’s covenant?

And if that is your question, then our final point is important. **God’s word is true** – great – yes but **God’s way is hidden**. OK, but don’t despair: **God wins**.

3. God wins

This is clear in a couple of ways as the chapter unfolds. Did you notice for a start the recurrence of that little word **‘but’** throughout the chapter? Let me give you an example from the earlier section where the North and South are locked in conflict.

Have a look at verses 17 - 19 ***He will determine to come with the might of his entire kingdom and will make an alliance with the king of the South. And he will give him a daughter in marriage in order to overthrow the kingdom, but his plans^[E] will not succeed or help him.***¹⁸ ***Then he will turn his attention to the coastlands and will take many of them, but a commander will put an end to his insolence and will turn his insolence back upon him.***¹⁹ ***After this, he will turn back toward the fortresses of his own country but will stumble and fall, to be seen no more.***

There is a **but** like that in verses 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 14, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 25, 27, 29, 32, 41, 44, 45: nearly half the verses of the chapter.

What is the point that is being made? Don't worry if you found it confusing with so many rulers being mentioned, jostling for supremacy. It *is* confusing: because no sooner is one ruler in dominance, than they are frustrated by someone else's rival claims.

Frustration, shattered dreams and shifts in the balance of power are built into human history. That is what we see when we look at the front pages of our papers, surely. Obama rides to victory in a wave of popularity, **but** two years later gets a nasty shock in the mid-terms; the Great British Empire is run from a tiny island nation by a fleet of ships, **but** then this week she sends her last Aircraft carrier to the scrap yard.

The question is why does the balance of power in the human race shift so remorselessly? Answer – because ultimately God holds the power and because of our sin no human power can safely retain it for long – only he can.

There is another refrain in these verses which points out God's hand on human history. It is the twin idea that the events of human history are appointed and that there is an end.

This is a drum beat that sounds increasingly as the chapter progresses. It's there at the end of verse 27: ***'an end will come at the appointed time'***. It's there at the beginning of verse 29 ***'At the appointed time'***. It's there in verse 35: ***'... until the time of the end, for it will still come at the appointed time.'***

Or at the end of verse 36: ***'until the time of wrath is completed, for what has been determined must take place.'*** And then that climax with which the chapter closes. ⁴⁵ ***He will pitch his royal tents between the seas at^U the beautiful holy mountain.*** (Shock horror...) ***Yet he will come to his end, and no one will help him.'***

You get the point: However great he thinks he is, his days are numbered, an end has been appointed; God wins.

It's noticeable how the language about this evil ruler undergoes a gear change from verse 36 to the end of the chapter.

It becomes more overblown than really fits for Antiochus Epiphanes, who lets face it only lasted a few years. And the way people understand that is to say that Antiochus... and every other megalomaniac ruler after him is a sneak preview of the anti-God, anti-Christ figure who stand behind all these arrogant, persecuting powers.

In other words the devil himself. But the devil's days are numbered. We can be absolutely sure: God wins.

So the challenge of the vision is surely to invest in God's kingdom above all else. Verse 33 puts it like this: ³³ ***"Those who are wise will instruct many, though for a time they will fall by the sword or be burned or captured or plundered."***

Maybe the world is in turmoil; maybe **our** world is in turmoil – but God's city, God's kingdom is triumphant. Rome can fall; our personal world may fall apart; but the city **of God** will triumph.

Nothing could possibly be more important for us than to know that God through his Son Jesus Christ, to be friends with him, because we are forgiven through Jesus' death and to make him known to others so they too can have a sure hope in an uncertain world.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

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