

Sermon Given by

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Daniel 12

By the time we get to Chapter 12, the fourteen year old boy we met in Chapter one is now an old man of eighty-six or seven – so for seventy plus years he has stood for God in a tiny minority in a hostile culture.

The only way he could ever begin to do that was through having a true sense of perspective on life.

That of course is a very precious commodity. There is that letter which was supposedly sent by a student to his parents at the end of one term. 'Dear Mum and Dad, I'm sorry you haven't heard from me in a while, but I've been having a very hectic time. A fire broke out in my lodgings and the flat was completely gutted. I only escaped by jumping out of the window and I broke my leg in the process. In the hospital I was in the care of a wonderful nurse and I'm delighted to tell you the news that we got married last Friday. My friends all say I've made a big mistake; but despite her being twenty years older than me and from a different background, I'm sure we'll be fine'.

New paragraph... 'So far this letter has all been untrue; none of it ever happened. What did happen is that I failed my end of term exams. So before I came home, I just wanted to get this minor matter into perspective...'

It's just a preachers' tale – I'm sure that letter never happened... But that idea of a major event bringing perspective to a less important event is certainly something Daniel would have been able to agree with.

Having lived in Babylon through successive twists and turns how is it that he has retained perspective over the long haul? It's a question we all ought to face. If we're Christians we easily lose an accurate perspective on our lives events; and if we're not yet followers of Christ, there is a good chance that we lack such a perspective. Daniel as a prophet would recommend a God's-eye view of the world to yield that vision of reality.

You won't be surprised to hear that the last chapter of Daniel is complicated; and I hope I won't be oversimplifying things if reduce it to two headings, both of them are two-pronged.

First this is a chapter about two ends.

1. Two ends.

Let me re-read verses 1-4 to begin with, please.

"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. ² Multitudes who

sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. ³ ***Those who are wise^[a] will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.*** 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."***

This follows on without a break from where we finished last week. We were reading about the man who exalts himself and does as he pleases, oppressing God's people mercilessly.

'Then', says the heavenly messenger, '***at that time*** - a time of hitherto unparalleled suffering for God's people - the angel Michael will act on behalf of God's people and deliverance will come'.

I commented last week in Chapter 11 that the portrait of the Seleucid King Antiochus Epiphanes, who was going to reign in almost 400 years' time when Daniel lived, had morphed imperceptibly by the end of the chapter into another figure even more sinister, who would dominate the world stage before the end of all ends, when God wraps up history. The description becomes too big to fit the short reign of Antiochus Epiphanes, however brutal he was.

And Daniel is told to seal up the vision, which really means to put it on permanent record, until the end, presumably because it is of permanent validity since it is about **the** end.

So in chapters 11 and 12 he is given a preview of the next four hundred years. There will be a time of cataclysmic suffering in the final stages of that but that suffering **will end**. **End no 1**. But he is told to seal the prophecy because it also concerns the grand finale of world history, which Antiochus' reign prefigures. Even worse suffering which again will come to an end. **End no 2**.

If you want another example of the bi-focal view of time in the chapter, just scan your eye down to verses 11 and 12:

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. ¹² Blessed is the one who waits for and reaches the end of the 1,335 days.

We noticed that phrase, the 'abomination that causes desolation' in last week's passage describing an occasion in the 160s bc when Antiochus Epiphanes put a statue of the Greek God Zeus on the altar in the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. Here however – a chapter later - the phrase is used of a period of intense suffering which will come immediately before the end of time itself.

We also had a reading from Mark's gospel in which Jesus used the same phrase to describe an event which was going to happen shortly after his lifetime – when the Roman emperor Titus invaded Jerusalem and sacked the temple. But the focus also shifts imperceptibly from that event to the time of the second coming, when the Son of Man comes on the clouds of heaven.

So the phrase 'abomination of desolation' is used interchangeably for three different events – or rather it is used for two different types of events: for awful anti-God events within history and for an even worse anti-God abomination at the end of time.

Because the abominations that cause desolation in the course of human history are sneak previews of the final abomination that causes desolation at the end.

I guess you could even add other anti-God, anti-Christ figures who come - and there have been so many.

I was reading recently about the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. On 1st Feb 1933, as Hitler was rising to power, Bonhoeffer broadcast in the German Broadcasting Company. And he finished his broadcast by saying this: 'Don't place blind faith in any leader. Such a leader will gradually become the Mis-leader. Any leader who makes an idol of himself mocks God.'

He was told on leaving the studio that his last sentences hadn't been broadcasted. Even by 1933, you see, Hitler had already become the Mis-leader... an anti-christ figure silencing that prophetic voice of a Christian pastor – of course far, far worse was to come and Bonhoeffer himself ultimately paid with his life for his principled, Christian resistance to Hitler.

I'm not saying he was uniquely the anti-christ, but he along with Mao and Stalin and Pol Pot and many others was a manifestation of the anti-christ tendency. And they prefigure a great rebellion at they end of time.

Confused? Well, don't worry – even after he has been given the revelation Daniel still has to ask how long till it all happens and he is given a very cryptic answer. 1290 days or 1335 days. It is a puzzle to us which we can't solve – but it is a measurement of time which is known to God. He has the clock ticking and the end will come.

Still confused? Well you're in good company: apparently even the angels puzzle over these things – did you notice in verse 5 how there are two angels present and one of them asks the great heavenly messenger who has given Daniel the vision how long it is all going to take?

He is given a cryptic answer as well. How long? And verse 7 tells us: **a time, times and half a time**. Interestingly the answer is given in the form of an oath: the heavenly messenger swears by him who lives forever. To the one outside time disturbing events within time cause no panic. He has them all covered in his plan and there will be an end.

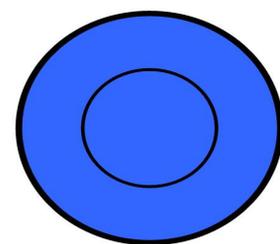
Straight on view

I have always found very helpful for understanding this bi-focal view of time a diagram I first saw in a wonderful little book called How to read the Bible for all it's worth.

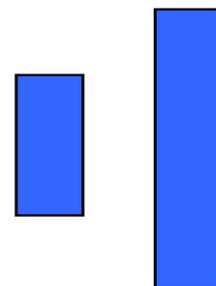
That book commented that some of the prophecies of the near future are set against the background of the great future at the end of the age – and sometimes they seem to blend. The reason for this is that the Bible regularly sees God's acts in temporal history in the light of his overall plan for all of human history.

It's something like looking at two discs, with a smaller one in front of a larger one, straight on. Then from the perspective of subsequent history to see then from a side view and at that point we become aware that there is actually a gap between them.

The value of that is that even if we are caught in the thick of tough times the foretelling of the end can be trusted – as God has already brought deliverance from evil to his people before, with an



Side View



intermediate end. So THE end will come.

We mustn't try to second guess when the end will come – that is not given to us to know. But there is no doubt **that** the end will come.

It's striking to me that even after receiving a revelation Daniel still doesn't have all the answers. We may find even with a word from God in the Bible that nonetheless, like Daniel, we have to live with some unanswered questions. But this great fact is not in doubt: the end will come.

So remember that perspective of two ends. And then closely connected to that another bifocal perspective: two destinies.

2. Two destinies.

Until the end comes, good and bad must live alongside each other; but when the end comes then an awesome separation occurs into two destinies.

That surfaces most clearly in the opening paragraph of the chapter... Let me read from the last little bit of verse 2 through to verse 4: *'... your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. ² Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. ³ Those who are wise^[a] will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever'.*

You can see the two destinies clearly there, I'm sure. Those verses imply conscious continuance of life beyond the grave for both the righteous and wicked. Perhaps it's worth me saying that they don't fit well with the idea that while some enjoy an eternity of heavenly bliss, others will simply be snuffed out after judgement, or annihilated.

That teaching has become increasingly popular, including in evangelical circles – but the same language of eternal duration is used of both states. Logically I can't make one of them an eternal condition and the other a temporary state of finite duration.

But even though it's mentioned here and even though the Bible has plenty to say about the eternal punishment of the wicked, here the focus is actually on the joy into which faithful believers will enter...

They may have well have died and been in the grave or slept in the dust of death as it is put here. That sentence falls on us all as fallen human beings – exactly as God said it would in the garden of Eden: *'dust you are and to dust you will return'.*

Christians who face the bitter oppression of a hostile world may not be delivered from death, but they are delivered **through** death: they rise to life and they then shine like stars for eternity.

And if ever you doubted whether that was possible, then we only need to think of the one whose death we remember at communion today – Jesus. He tasted death for us when he died on the cross. But now –dust of earth is on the throne of heaven. A real human being with a real human body has been resurrected. And everyone who belongs to Jesus – Old Testament and New Testament believers will be raised with him.

When the end of the world comes there are two possible destinies – and only two. And therefore really nothing will matter more than whether our names are written in the book of life.

Again that brings a very clear sense of perspective on life.

I rather like the limerick about a bear in a zoo:

A cheerful old bear in the zoo -
He never lacked nothing to do;
When it bored him, you know,
To walk to and fro,
He reversed it and walked fro and to.

It conjures up the meaningless existence of a bear, tramping this way and that or that way and this – what does it matter.

Whilst we are much busier than a bear in a zoo, our activity is just as bereft of meaning and purpose if we are caged into this minute historical moment bound by the present and living with no future to live for and to move towards.

I think of what John Wesley once said as a much healthier perspective: ‘I desire to have both heaven and hell ever before my eye while I stand on this narrow isthmus of life between these two boundless oceans’.

That of course is the path of **wisdom**. To focus on the big issue, not to be distracted on minor matters.

And strikingly that idea of being **wise** is the challenge of the last couple of chapters of the book. Have you spotted it as it has reappeared?

It came last week in chapter 11 verse 33-35³³ ***“Those who are wise will instruct many, though for a time they will fall by the sword or be burned or captured or plundered. ³⁴ When they fall, they will receive a little help, and many who are not sincere will join them. ³⁵ Some of the wise will stumble, so that they may be refined, purified and made spotless until the time of the end, for it will still come at the appointed time.***

They have the end in view so clearly that they are able to cope with the struggles that come their way and they do what they can to influence others – ***instructing them*** with the heavenly perspective. They not only continued believing, but spread the truth to others. Or as the phrase we have already looked at in 12 verse 3 puts it: they ***lead many to righteousness***’.

The types of people who end up with the two destinies – the wise or the wicked - are mentioned again in verse 10 of our chapter: ¹⁰ ***Many 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.***

If I have understanding - a clear sense of the end - I will persevere; suffering won't make me bitter; it will be used by God to make me better.

Well so much for the two destinies and the character of the people concerned in each case. But the book ends with a lovely personal word to Daniel in the same vein in verse 13: 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.”***

Keep going on the same course you have stuck to for so long, Daniel. And when death comes you will enjoy rest beyond the grave – no more struggle; then resurrection; then a glorious heavenly inheritance.

What a prospect! May God give us the wisdom of that eternal **perspective** this Christmas time; and the wisdom to share it with as many others as we can.

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.)