

Sermon on Daniel 12 – Nov 1, 2020

I think it is fair to say that many people are completely fascinated about the future – from the weather forecast, to what will happen to their children and grand-children, not to mention horoscopes, astrology, and endless films, TV shows and books. Who can forget the ‘Back to the Future’ movies with Michael J. Fox as Marty McFly and his time travelling exploits? So, let us climb together into our virtual DeLorean and set the time circuits for 600 B.C. Because we have come to the last in our series of talks on the book of Daniel and this morning, I want to do two things – bring together what we have heard over the past 5 weeks from my other preaching friends and focus on some key aspects of the climax of the book of Daniel in chapter 12.

So, in the final chapter of his book, Daniel is coming to the end of his life - it is thought that he was around 90 years old by this time (which shows that God can use us just as powerfully even in our later years). He has been in Babylon for over 70 years, since being taken captive from Jerusalem as a teenager by the forces of Nebuchadnezzar - he has risen to the highest echelons of power, he has seen off multiple rulers of different characters and of different empires - he has even survived the lion’s den. Despite all this, he has led a godly life, was tested incredibly, and used powerfully.

We can almost say that Daniel has two personae – one in this world, very capable and intensely practical, running a nation, and at the same time trying to live by his faith in a culture that was absolutely set against it. And there is the other worldly Daniel, the prophet of the Messiah, a seer of visions and a prophet of the end times. In some ways, Daniel is a perfect example of being in the world, but not of the world. He did not have one lifestyle for work and another for his spiritual life. He was a constant man of God.

Chapter 12 starts with some grim reading and is immediately followed by words of immense joy – the familiar biblical themes of both suffering and of salvation, of battle and blessing, so to speak. We are at the end of the description of Daniel’s final vision that started back in chapter 10, and Daniel is foreseeing what will happen in the end times. Michael, the angel protecting Israel, tells him that there will be a time of distress such as not happened from the beginning of nations – worse than the destruction caused by the Babylonians, the Assyrians and the Romans, worse than all of the conflicts in Middle East over the past 70 years, worse than the Holocaust. It does not bear thinking about.

And yet, that is followed by one of the greatest Old Testament affirmations of life beyond the grave: We are told in verse 1 - ‘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’. According to my study bible, this is the only place in the whole of the Old Testament where the words ‘everlasting life’ are used. And he goes on to say – ‘One day you will shine like the stars for ever and ever. 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’. Leading people to righteousness is the reason why we run Alpha courses, have youth ministry, and reach out into our community. God’s purpose for us is not sit around waiting for Jesus’ return to redeem the world. He wants our lives to make a difference now. As well as looking after our own spiritual lives, we are all called to be a blessing to those around us in our own time.

It is quite natural for us to wonder if our name is in the book. I know my name is on the St Mary's electoral roll, but I am quite sure that it is not the same thing! The book mentioned here in Daniel is likely the same as the 'book of life' mentioned in the New Testament, in Revelation 20 & 21. Having one's name written in this book is essential if we are to awake to everlasting life in the age to come. It is fundamental to our Christian faith that this can only happen if we truly believe in our hearts that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who died for our sins and was resurrected by the power of God the Father through the Holy Spirit.

Daniel hears one of the angels asking, "How long will it be before these astonishing things are fulfilled?" Sometimes we cannot help but look to the future. Even as we are about to go back in lockdown once again, everyone right now is asking when is the Covid-19 pandemic going to be over? When can we get back to normal, whatever that is? And the question in Daniel is one that many people have asked since biblical times. When will be the end of times? What are the signs? We want to know how things end, but at this point I would like to ask a separate question - how will knowing this change our lives in Christ? How would it help if we knew God's precise timing of events? Would we act differently, maybe start to try and deepen our faith, share our faith with others or serve God in the community? Of course, it is likely that people will respond differently. For me, it would be better for me not to know. I am a bit of a procrastinator, one of those people who will happily put off until tomorrow what we should be doing today! We should thank God today and every day for the gift of our lives and the opportunity to glorify and serve him.

And the response to angel's questions is hardly precise or definitive. We read in verse 8 that Daniel himself did not even understand what was meant by "It will be for a time, times and half a time". He had walked with God all his life. He had the gift of prophecy and could interpret dreams with the fullest accuracy and authority. There were visions that had come to him from God, but this time he could only shake his head in incomprehension. Personally, I think that is rather encouraging! Even someone as obviously blessed as Daniel did not have all the answers. Over the centuries, many scholars have studied the bible to try to predict when Jesus will come again. We are told in the New Testament, specifically not to do this. It has not been given to us to know the time of the end because God has deemed that it is not important for us to know it. We must take real care when thinking about biblical prophecy, of not fitting certain facts to writings just to fulfil our own preferences. And so we might even be asking - what is the point of prophecy? Is prophesy even helpful? Well, the point of prophecy is not to precisely map out the future, it is of course to point us to God. We are not to get caught in the details of precise time and dates. And as in all things in our faith, it is how we respond to it and the choices we make. The ultimate objective of the prophetic writings is not to foretell the future but most importantly to reveal that God has been with us all throughout the world's history and He is definitely in charge – God is in control, He has it covered but the powers that Julie talked about last week will not give up easily or without a fight. It might be interesting to hypothesize about the future, but I would contend that it is what we do today that really counts. People are always looking for answers in prophecy and other means, but we should just look at what God says to Daniel. Don't go bothering yourself with the time of the end. Just go and be faithful till you come to be with me, Daniel. Nothing fancy, nothing flashy, just faithful to the end.

We are to trust in God and his timing. The Message version of verse 13 tell us that Daniel was told, 'And you? Go about your business without fretting or worrying. Relax. When it's all over, you will be on your feet to receive your reward'. What a wonderful promise this must have been for Daniel. He

had strived so hard both in his working life and as a prophet. Now rest would come, and God had allotted to him his inheritance of everlasting life.

The book of Daniel is a bit of the ubiquitous game of two halves – the first half is the gripping account of Daniel and his three friends in Babylon, and the second half is full of prophesy and apocalyptic writing in the same manner as Ezekiel or Revelation. God speaks to us in different ways in each part, holding up the example of their lives in the first one and through Daniel's visions and prophecy in the second. Perhaps one of the reasons for its relevance to us today is that Daniel and his friends managed to maintain their faith while in high profile, public positions in a society that was antagonistic to their faith to the point of trying to do away with them. It is unfortunate that we cannot say the same of many politicians or leaders in our own times. It would have been easy for Daniel and the others to simply practise their faith in private worship and the fact that they did not is a wonderful example and a lesson to all of us.

Daniel shows us that it is possible to live a Christ-centred life in the face of extreme adversity and challenges, but it will take a lot of trust in God and effort on our own part. His visions do not bring easy answers – if anything, they confirm all that we need to know right now without seeing into the future – Daniel's visions are supposed to shake us out of our comfort zones, to keep us on the right path and to always look to and trust in God, despite whatever is happening in and around us. Unlike some of the other Old Testament prophets, I like it that we get a chance to see Daniel's personality - faithful, intelligent, full of conviction and humility, and yet courageous enough not to dilute his faith in order to be accepted by the prevailing culture.

It might be that some of us are very worried about the future right now, wondering how we will cope with illness, finances, mental health, and other issues. Perhaps we can take some inspiration from Daniel of the importance of living for today and be comforted that if we can persevere in faith, everlasting life is the ultimate prize.

It is kind of interesting that this is the third time this year that I have given the final talk in a sermon series – previously on Revelation and the end of the Exodus series in Joshua. Maybe I could have combined those two previous sermons together and come up with this one. It is about the journey not about the destination and the timing of getting there – we need to take care of our spiritual lives today and not be always looking to the future - and if we do so, everlasting life in the age to come will be ours.

We do not need a time travelling supercar to give us comfort about our future. The Book of Daniel ends with the triumph of Christ over death itself, and the last chapter of Daniel contains a message of hope that despite all of the tough times, there is hope of resurrection and everlasting life for those who faithfully believe in our Lord Jesus Christ to the end. Amen