

The Gospel according to Daniel: Looking at the Future, Living in the Present

Daniel 9:20-12:13

This week, as our family was riding to pick up Jonathan from football practice, the conversation between the other kids turned to their grades in school. And it was mainly between Rachel and Abigail—they were discussing A's and B's and what they had in various classes. And, Isaac, who I didn't think was really paying attention, said, "I get the letter 'N' on my report card. What's 'N' mean?" What he has in mind are N's beside one particular category, "Behavior." And the letter N, as Leslie told in the van, means "Needs Improvement, buddy." To which he said—because he has seen these N's for a while—"Why am not improving?"

Well, I feel a certain kindred-spirit with Isaac this morning in regards to this text. When our staff laid out the preaching schedule for the book of Daniel, we intentionally scheduled these chapters after a break for me so that I'd have plenty of time to study them. Well, after two weeks of seeking to advance my understanding it, I want to echo Isaac and say, "Why am I not improving?"

But apparently I'm in good company. Here are a couple of quotes. The first is from Jerome, an early church leader: "Because it is unsafe to pass judgment on the opinions of the great teachers of the church and to set one above another, I shall simply repeat the view of each and leave it to the reader's judgment as to whose explanation ought to be followed." He then listed nine conflicting opinions on the meaning of the passage, declaring himself unable to decide which one (if any) was right. One contemporary writer flatly called some of these verses "the most controversial verses in the Bible." Another said that "the history of the exegesis of the 70 Weeks of Daniel is the Dismal Swamp of Old Testament" interpretation.

So what do we do? What do you do when you run across a really hard passage in the Bible? Well, I want to suggest to you a way forward. *Which is that main things are the plain things.*

I think that's good advice for us as we come to a word like this, a word that even Daniel struggled to understand in detail. We're not going to answer every question or understand in detail every verse. Indeed, I think texts like this are intentionally difficult so that are reminded that we must live by faith and not by sight. But that doesn't mean that we can't know anything. We can know what God intends for us to know. We can know how to love Him and trust Him and live for Him in the last days. That's what Daniel 9-12 is all about. It's like a painting. There are small brush strokes and details and fascinating features. All of which are true and important and good but all which can only be rightly appreciated by stepping back and seeing the whole thing.

So, that's how we'll approach the text this morning as we conclude our study of Daniel. We're going to try to keep the plain things the main things. We have more divisions than normal, but we'll be brief with each. So, 6 Principles for Last-Day Living.

Number one, the text teaches us to recall your true citizenship (9:20-23). Jesus said, "You are not of this world." Peter said you are strangers and exiles.

What does that look like? It's easy to overlook, but I want you to notice the way that Daniel keeps track of time. Look at the end of Daniel 9:21 – "while I was speaking in prayer, the

man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the first, came to me in swift flight *at the time of the evening sacrifice.*” Now, what’s the big deal with that?

Well, it’s remarkable in a couple of ways. First, Daniel hasn’t been in Israel in almost 70 years. Daniel was a young man, maybe even a young boy when Nebuchadnezzar shipped him to Babylon. And, second, the Temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar almost 40 years earlier than this prayer and wouldn’t be rebuilt for years to come.

But here Daniel’s watch is still set to Jerusalem standard time. It’s as if Daniel is homesick for a country he barely remembers.

I think that desire for a better country pervades the last few chapters of Daniel. It’s why Daniel is praying in the first place. It’s why Daniel is scouring the scrolls of Jeremiah in search of answers. It’s why Daniel is sapped of strength when he hears of conflict for the people of God. It’s why Daniel is encouraged when he hears of victory for the people of God.

Daniel’s daily life was in Babylon but his deepest loves were in Jerusalem.

Isn’t that one of the reasons God wants us to gather here every Sunday morning? God has made us in his own image, and part of that image is being a lover. The problem of sin is that we love the wrong things. Or, at the very least, we love some things too much and other things too little. We love money and we love power and we love material possessions and we love sports. None of which is wrong, but none of which are God.

So what does God do to help us battle this? God gives us regular, repeated remembrances of who He is and what He has done and what He has promised. God knew before the hymn writer ever wrote it that we “are prone to wander, prone to leave the God that we love.”

So, God stirs our affections by reminders and visions of a better country. Isn’t that what Hebrews says in Hebrews 11:13–16? “These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.”

Brothers and sisters, don’t think you are above wandering and leaving the God you love. God knows your heart better than you do. Don’t neglect daily and weekly means of grace—reading your Bible, praying, worshiping, spending time with God’s people. All of which are calculated to make you homesick for a place you’ve never been and in love with a God you’ve never seen. Remember 1 Peter 1:8–9 – “Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

Second principle: Rejoice over and rest in God’s covenant mercies (9:24). So, what about these 70 weeks? Well, let me begin by quoting Alistair Begg who said, “This is my interpretation this morning. However, I reserve the right to change my mind tonight. Further, I reserve the right to change my mind tomorrow, next week, next month, next year and any other time.” What is going on in this text? What are the 7 weeks, the 62 weeks, 1 week, the half-week, the prince, the abomination that causes desolation? What about all that? *Well, plain things, main things.*

We'll start with the 70 weeks or, as most commentators understand them, 70 weeks of years, or, doing the math, 490 years. Now, all kinds of people have sought to calculate with precision some date in the Old Testament history that is 490 years before the birth of Christ. I am not saying that is impossible. In fact, many of the people I respect have views that treat this 490 years quite literally. I used to be one of them. Having said that, though, I don't think that's the intended way to read this text. In fact, if Gabriel was trying to communicate 490 years, he could have said in 490 years this will happen. But he doesn't say that. Instead, he uses numbers that are loaded with significance for the people of God.

Remember, Jeremiah had prophesied 70 years of exile. And, in a sense, that was coming to an end. In fact, we see in v. 25 that a decree would go out for Israel to be rebuilt. And, in history, we know that happened with Cyrus in 539 BC. You can also read about that in 2 Chronicles 36.

But Gabriel here speaks of something seven times that length— 7×70 . Or, in biblical terms, the completion or perfection of that period of exile. In other words, a decree would be issued by Cyrus, people would return, the temple would be rebuilt, daily life in Jerusalem will resume, but the exile would not be over. It would not be complete—seven! It would not be perfected—seven! Why? Because God's covenant purposes was not simply that the people would be back in the land but rather that God would be first in their affections. You see, that's why the text leads with covenant language and covenant promises. "Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place" (v.24).

You see, Gabriel is now speaking Daniel's language. We know from earlier in the chapter that Daniel has been reading Jeremiah. And what are the promises there? **Jeremiah 31:33-34** – "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." Doesn't that sound a lot like v. 24?

And doesn't that lead us fully and finally to Jesus? And I think that's what v. 26 is all about. "And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing." To be honest, there are a lot of opinions on this verse and the next one, but as one preacher said, even a child raised in Sunday School can connect the dots to Jesus here. To put it in the language of the text, the exile is over, not when Cyrus issues a decree or when Ezra reinstates worship or when Nehemiah rebuilds the wall. The Exile is over exactly as Isaiah 40:3 says: When voice cries in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the desert a highway for our God." The exact words that John the Baptist quoted when Jesus came to him in the wilderness.

Friends, I don't get every nuance about the 70 weeks, but I do know that one day outside Jerusalem *all* the covenant curses of God's Law fell upon the true Israel of God, Jesus Christ, so that sinners like you me could know the good news that Isaiah promised in that same passage: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that

her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins" (Is. 40:1-2).

Church, do you see what your sin deserves? And do you see what Christ has done? He has redeemed you from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for you. He has returned to you everything you have lost through your rebellion against God. So do often what you sang this morning. "I cast my mind to Calvary / Where Jesus bled and died for me. / I see His wounds, His hands, His feet. / My Saviour on that cursed tree."

Third principle: Recognize that the opposition to God and His people is fierce (vv. 26-27). This is the remainder of the passage. "And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing. And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed. And he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator."

Again, questions abound. Who is the one who will destroy the city? Who is the one who will put an end to sacrifice and the offering? And, beyond that, are these the same persons?

Well, this is where the opinions are absolutely all over the place. Some think this is a reference to Antiochus Euphianes who defiled the temple in the 2nd c. BC. Others think this is Titus, the Roman general who destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD. Still others think that the man in v. 27 is actually the Antichrist who will abolish sacrifice on some future date. And, the amazing thing is, at some point in the past week, I've believed all three of those! And there is a sense in which I still do.

You see, it's not uncommon in OT prophecy for one vision to represent several different events. For the prophet to stand at the base of a mountain and describe the peak, only for later readers to understand that that one peak was actually four peaks. Some past, some present, some still to come. Perhaps that is at work here. Antiochus Euphianes sacrificed pigs on the altar and erected a statue of Zeus in the Temple—he indeed left the temple desolate. Titus would come and obliterate Jerusalem just a generation after the coming of Christ—Jesus himself points to this event as a fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy. And both of these tyrants were but forerunners of a man of lawlessness who will come with vengeance and wrath in the last days

In other words, the people of God should expect opposition and trials, not be surprised by them. Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:12, "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Whether it is the literal antichrist or a little antichrist, Satan hates the worship of God and the people of God.

Do you pray in light of that? Even praying for our services here and recognizing that this is spiritual warfare? Do you arm yourself for battle on a daily basis? Or do you live a functional materialist, believing it all you can see is all that really is? Do you pray for the persecuted church regularly? Do you read your Bible as a global Christian? Imagine reading this text as a little girl in Pakistan who has lost her father for his witness to Jesus. Then it's less about prophecy charts and who is right or who's wrong and more about God granting perseverance and hope and trust to those believers who are struggling to believe.

Fourth, trust in the victory of God (12:1-2). Friends, no matter the opposition or the intensity of it, the Bible always discourages panic. And here the text provides two compelling

reasons. Look over in Daniel 12:1. “At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book.”

I don’t think it is necessarily profitable to engage in lots of speculation about how this happens. The Bible doesn’t talk about guardian angels like you might see in some Hallmark Channel movie. In fact, I am certain it’s not that.

But it’s not nothing. The Bible says that Michael has charge of the people of God. Indeed, Psalm 91:9–12 says, “Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place— the Most High, who is my refuge— no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.”

Isn’t that an encouraging picture? You may not think you have strength to overcome the darkness, and indeed you may not. But God’s angels will pick up the fallen saints and carry them across the finish line

Indeed, that’s, in a sense, where the text goes in 12:2. “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”

It is sometimes said that the OT does not teach the resurrection of the dead. Well, someone should have informed Daniel, because here it is! I love how Dale Ralph Davis comments on this verse:

When, however, Daniel hears that his people will be rescued or delivered we naturally wonder how that will take place. Part of an answer may come from verse 2: And many of those sleeping in the dusty ground will awake. That is, deliverance for some at least will come via resurrection. They are then a vindicated people, for though they may forfeit their lives in the time of suffering, their resurrection will prove to be their deliverance and more than that—an act of God’s defiance to the ungodly ‘terminators’ of this age.

The question is do we live in light of this truth? Do we live that are marked more by safety than by eternity? Do we grieve as those who have no hope? Do we think of death as defeat, even for those who gave their lives for the Son of God? Do we understand that true wisdom is taking up the cross and not sidestepping it because even if they take our heads Jesus will just put them on again in the resurrection?

Church, victory in Jesus is not a fiction but a fact—a fact that is secured by his own resurrection and will evident in ours. Trust His victory and live from it. Not in fear or panic or dread, but confidence.

Fifth, point others to Jesus (12:1-4). Look at Daniel 12:2-3. “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”

Notice the parallel structure in v. 3. Both halves of the verse end by speaking of the people of God shining like the stars. That means the first halves are really parallel as well. Those who are wise are in fact, the ones who turn many to righteousness

The reason is theological. Resurrection day is not only a day of vindication; it is also a day of separation. The truth is that all who sleep in the dust will awake, but they will awake to vastly different realities. Some will awake to everlasting life. Some will awake everlasting contempt.

For those who don't know Christ, we want to be especially clear on this verse. There is no joy in preaching the doctrine of Hell. The Bible says that God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. As God's people, we want to love what God loves and be saddened by what saddens God. And so it is here. It is not with joy that we speak of judgment and punishment of sin, but it the witness of the Bible and, I would add, the witness of your very own conscious. God has made you to know that you will live forever and there is a right and a wrong, even rights and wrongs that you have done. God has made you that way so that will be provoked to think about standing before Him and being judged by Him. And God has sent His Son, Jesus Christ, for that very day in your life. He has lived the life you should have lived and died the death you should have died. The question is: are your trusting Him?

But this is also a word to the church. C.S. Lewis notes the stakes:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations....There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal....it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours” (The Weight of Glory)

Are you wise? Notice, wisdom is not measured in IQ or your ability to defend the 5 points of Calvinism or to defeat them. Wisdom is a life that turns many to righteousness. That doesn't mean you save others or that you can control who comes to Christ and who doesn't. It does mean that you're being sober-minded about eternity and faithful in the present.

Which leads to the last principle: Remain faithful as you wait (12:5-12). We won't reread all the text, but I do want to highlight a couple of things as we close. What immediately grabs our attention are the numbers at the end, in verses 11 and 12: “And from the time that the regular burnt offering is taken away and the abomination that makes desolate is set up, there shall be 1,290 days. Blessed is he who waits and arrives at the 1,335 days.”

What are the 1290 days and what about the 1335? Well, again, creativity is often employed at this point. But I agree with one writer who said that “The most notable characteristic of the numeral 1,335 is that it is larger than 1,290.” In other words, the one who lasts for 1335 days has necessarily outlasted the 1290 days. Or, to put it simply, they have persevered.

The practical takeaway in that is that Jesus' return may be further away than you think. How long will it be before these astonishing things are fulfilled? Perhaps a little longer than you

hope or imagine. Not that you should live with indifference as if he will never come. But that you should live with faith until he calls you home, no matter the trials, no matter the tribulations.

Indeed, that's in some ways the message of the book, pressed home for us in these last verses. Did you notice it? Look at verse 8. "I heard, but I did not understand. Then I said, 'O my lord, what shall be the outcome of these things?'" Notice the bookended response of the angel. "Go your way, Daniel, for the words are shut up and sealed until the time of the end" (v.9). "But go your way till the end" (v.13a). And what is the promise? "And you shall rest and shall stand in your allotted place at the end of the days" (v.13b).

I love the imagery in that last verse. It's drawn from the conquest of the holy land in the book of Joshua. "The people of Israel did as the LORD commanded Moses; they allotted the land" (Josh. 14:5). The various tribes cast lots for their portions and so received an allotment, a plot of land, a place to call home. All they had to do was be faithful. God would go before them and . God would fight for them.

So it is with us. The only plot of land this world can offer you is a place to be buried, and you have to buy that yourself. How different the future with God:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. (Revelation 22:1-5)