

Caught in the Crossfire

Daniel 11:2-12:4

Daniel: When Kingdoms Collide

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Good morning church family. Please turn in your Bibles to Daniel chapter 11. This morning I am filling in for Pastor Josh, who was going to preach, but a couple of his kids have tested positive for COVID so they are all quarantined. Please pray for them, that they make a quick recovery.

Next week Dominick, who was already scheduled to preach, will close out our time in the book of Daniel. Which means I have the unique pleasure of opening Daniel 11 with you. And it's quite a chapter.

Earlier this week someone told me it took them four sittings just to get through Daniel 11. It makes sense. Daniel 11 is long, confusing, highly debated, and any attempt to understand it in depth feels excruciatingly tedious.

Aren't you glad you showed up this morning?

In chapter 11 we are transported from one bad thing to the next. Often caught in the back and forth as political powers continually fight for dominance. It's exhausting. But I can't help but think that some of us can relate. Is anyone tired of the constant conflict in our time? Does the news feel like a daily grind? A confusing mess. Endless arguing. One disaster after another.

When is it going to stop? When can we catch our breath? We might think that once the election is over all this fighting will end, but will it?

In the midst of a world in turmoil, many feel caught in the crossfire. Caught between nations in tension, or political parties in conflict. And if we are going to try to understand Daniel 11 we first have to get this idea of being caught in the crossfire. Our chapter today is told from the perspective of the land of Israel. It is why some history is included and other stuff is left out. We read of the kings of the north and the kings of south waging a constant battle, but in between them is the land of Israel and the people of God, casualties of the quest for power.

They had hoped going back to their land would be the beginning of peace and prosperity; what is revealed is that the exile seems to continue until the end of time.

So this vision, which was promised in chapter 10, is given to Daniel about three years after the Israelites had started to return to the land. While this vision overlaps with much of the same history as the visions in chapters 2, 7, and 8, this vision is the last, longest, and most detailed.

This report of what's to come for the people of God is meant to make his people wise. It calls them to action so they will know how to live in light of this future. And while much of this prophecy is history from our vantage point it still invites us to be wise. To know the times, to know the end, and to know how to live in between.

What we find is that the threat to God's people caught in the crossfire isn't just to be a casualty of war, but to be seduced away from faithfulness to God.

So if we are going to be like the wise we need to see at least three things from this passage.

THE FUTILITY OF WORLDLY POWERS. (11:2-20)

First, we need to see the futility of worldly powers. These first 19 verses cover roughly 350 years of history and conquest. Of course it doesn't cover everything, but it is incredibly accurate in its depiction.

Verse 2 begins by telling us about some of the kings of Persia, including Xerxes (called Ahasuerus), who was king in the book of Esther. Then in verse 3, a mighty king comes on the scene who had great dominion and does what he wills. This is Alexander the Great. In chapter 8 he is referred to as the goat. But as he arises, his kingdom is broken into four kingdoms that he did not intend. And two of the kingdoms are the focus of verses 5-19, filling in some gaps to the vision of chapter 8.

These two kingdoms are the north and the south, with Israel caught in the middle. Historically they are considered the Seleucid kingdom, which is the north in the region of Syria and Babylon, and the Ptolemaic kingdom, which is the south and in the region of Egypt.

What follows is a seemingly endless sequence of conflicts, war, betrayals, and political moves which never seem to reach a conclusion. We could go through each one and identify their referent in history but you would forget it as soon as you walked out of here. What I want you to see from this section is the repeated theme, that no matter how great the kingdom or brilliant their strategies, they never endure.

Repeated throughout this section is the word "but" in English, and it reveals how every kingdom of man falls. Verse 6: An alliance is made with the marriage of the daughter of the king of the south, BUT she shall not retain the strength of her arm. Verse 9: The king of North comes into the realm of the South, BUT shall return to his own land. Verse 12: He shall cast down tens of thousands BUT he shall not prevail. Verse 14: The people shall rise against the south, BUT they shall fail. Verses 16, 17, 18, 19: Over and over kingdoms rise and they fall.

Their endless strife is futile. Like a fist fight on the Titanic. Each skirmish might have a winner, but the ship is going down. For it is only temporal.

What's the implication for the people of God? Well, as we've said for many weeks now (and to quote Psalm 146:3), trust not in the kingdoms of man. A needed reminder right before the election.

But, I want to take this a little further and look specifically at verse 14. Right in the middle of all the chaos. We see, "In those times many shall rise against the king of the south, and the violent among your own people shall lift themselves up in order to fulfill the vision, but they shall fail."¹

Now it's difficult to know what the vision or prophecy was that they were trying to bring to reality. But at the very least you can see that some of the people of God joined in this conflict in order to bring about some desired future, likely some vision of the kingdom of God.

But, the kingdom of God does not come through our own power. Another way to say this is, "the ends don't justify the means." It can be such a temptation in our day to have good desires and hopes, even godly desires and hopes, but to seek them the wrong way.

¹Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

Now, let me be clear, this doesn't mean we shouldn't be engaged in ways of contributing to our world whether that be politically, economically, or socially. In fact we should be deeply engaged. I believe Genesis 1:28 calls us to this sort of work.

But at times our temptation can be the idea that if we just get the right businesses, the right laws, the right leaders or parties in place then we can bring in the kingdom of God. *And it doesn't matter what it takes to get there.*

But this too shall fail.

For the kingdom of God does not come through worldly powers, strategies, and tactics. The kingdom of God is not just a future hope. It is the way of living according to God's design. Both the ends and the means matter.

But there is a second implication here for the people of God as well.

The early church father Jerome says that in this time of conflict the people of God were divided into factions and parties. Some supported Ptolemy and the others Antiochus the Great. The political alliances tore them apart. It's easy to see how this can happen in our day. With all the controversy and fighting. People picking sides and wishing for the downfall of fellow believers.

One of the first symptoms that reveal someone might have too much faith in the kingdoms of this world is the enmity they have with fellow believers. Not associating with believers because of their political views. Trashing other believers online. Gloating over political victories or responding in violence because of a loss. These and other actions are signs you might have your allegiances misplaced.

If we are to be wise we must see the futility of worldly powers and hold fast to God and his coming kingdom.

THE NEED TO STAND FIRM AND TAKE ACTION. (11:21-35)

The second thing we need to see is the need to stand firm and take action.

Verse 21 introduces us to one who is known in history as Antiochus Epiphanes. Verse 21 says, "In his place shall arise a contemptible person to whom royal majesty has not been given. He shall come in without warning and obtain the kingdom by flatteries."

We met this contemptible person earlier in chapter 8. He was the little horn. We spent a lot of time talking about Antiochus Epiphanes then, so I won't go into as much detail, but at this point this whole section of our passage now focuses on him and his relation to the people of God.

Whereas before, the people of God were only in the crossfire, they now become caught in the crosshairs of a tyrant. Look with me at verses 29-31. It tells how Antiochus attacks the south again, but in verse 30 ships of Kittim, meaning Rome, come and intimidate him from finishing off Egypt.

So like a little kid who can't get what he wants Antiochus takes his anger out on Jerusalem and the holy covenant during his return home. Verse 31 shows he profanes the temple and fortress and sets up idol worship in the temple.

History tells us this means he will sentence to death anyone who circumcises their children, sacrifices to God, observes the Sabbath, or even just has Scripture in their possession.

Dale Davis summarizes these events this way: “In this reign of terror it seems the only choice was to be a live pagan or a dead Israelite.”²

You see the real danger wasn’t just persecution but rather compromise. And we see this clearly in verses 32-35. Read these with me.

Daniel 11:32-35

³²He shall seduce with flattery those who violate the covenant, but the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action. ³³And the wise among the people shall make many understand, though for some days they shall stumble by sword and flame, by captivity and plunder. ³⁴When they stumble, they shall receive a little help. And many shall join themselves to them with flattery, ³⁵and some of the wise shall stumble, so that they may be refined, purified, and made white, until the time of the end, for it still awaits the appointed time.

Here we see the goal in this apocalyptic vision, because the goal is not simply that they would know what is up ahead, but that they would know how to live in light of what’s up ahead. And this message is the same for us today. For we have the same temptations of worldly compromise in our own time.

Antiochus is pictured like a great deceiver. Some probably thought they could go in league with Antiochus without compromising their belief. Some were scared into compromising. Some were seduced by their own greed and lust for power.

But those who know God act differently. It’s said, these people stand firm and take action. That they are wise. In these words, Daniel is uniquely contrasting the way of Antiochus and his kingdom and the way of the kingdom of God.

In verse 21, Antiochus is introduced as someone who strongly took the kingdom by deception. The language of “strongly took” is the same word as “stand firm.” Then in verse 30, Antiochus is one who took action against the holy covenant.

But those who know God and live according to his kingdom, act very different than Antiochus. Dave Helm writes, “What follows in verses 33-35 is not military action, but rather, moral action.”³

From verse 14 we’ve already noticed the negative view given to those who use violence or the powers of man. Whereas Antiochus strongly takes the kingdom, those who know God, stand firm in God’s kingdom wherever they are. This is the picture of Daniel in chapter 1. And just like Daniel, these people are described as wise.

Wisdom is the characteristic of seeing rightly and living rightly. These who are truly wise see that God reigns, so they oppose Antiochus’ kingdom by standing firm and taking action. This entails at least three things.

² Dale Ralph Davis, *The Message of Daniel: His Kingdom Cannot Fail*, The Bible Speaks Today, p. 154

³ David Helm, *Daniel for You*, p. 195

They live according to the kingdom of God.

Antiochus was attacking everyone who followed God. He was killing them or enticing them away from godly living. But part of what it meant to stand firm was to pursue righteousness and live according to the kingdom of God no matter what. This commitment to worship and holiness was a defiant stance against the kingdom of Antiochus, even if it ended in death.

Today we face the same threat of compromise to our broader culture. We may not be facing the same threat of death but the same enticements exist all around. The same greed, violence, deceit, and flattery tempt us to compromise on our faithfulness to God.

What are the ways this world tempts you away from faithfulness?

They lead others to righteousness.

Rather than violence or military might, verse 33 says they help others understand. Similarly chapter 12 tells us they turn many to righteousness. They encourage and challenge others to know God and follow his kingdom.

But they also help them understand the times. You see the people of God aren't disengaged but they are deeply engaged. They see the ways people are compromising their faith. They understand how to redemptively engage with our world.

Are you leading others to righteousness? Yes, evangelism, but also continual discipleship. Are you helping others to know our times and to know our eternal God?

They endure to the end.

The kingdom of God comes through suffering and through being refined. Here the vision anticipates what's to come in chapter 12. Here in verses 33-35 we see that the wise will stumble or rather die by sword and flame. But this stumbling is meant to be a refining that will be seen in the end.

They knew that the way of God's kingdom comes through suffering and refinement. They knew that the greatest issue in life isn't pursuing earthly benefits but pursuing Christ to the end.

Could you say the same about your life?

OUR HOPE IN THIS LIFE IS THE LIFE TO COME. (11:36-12:4)

Now the last thing we need to see is that our hope in this life is the life to come. Here we find the very reason we can stand firm, take action, and endure to the end.

The big question: Who is the king in verse 36? Most agree that at verse 40 we begin to talk about the end times, but not with verses 36-39. Some say it still refers to Antiochus. The language might favor that. We never heard of Antiochus' end. The following images relate to him but aren't nearly as specific as before.

Others think it relates to a figure far removed from Antiochus. That here we begin a description of an end times sort of ruler. This section continues on through 12:4 which talks about resurrection. So it makes sense that this section refers to the end of time.

Much of the confusion comes from how biblical prophecy often works. It often takes the worst or the best characters and uses them as an anchor point to talk about something in the future.

Thus, Antiochus forms a model for the final king. In fact, this section even mirrors the previous passage regarding Antiochus. There is a rise to power, conflict with the north and south, some people are compromised, and it finishes with a word to the wise.

Matthew 24 similarly has this dual fulfillment characteristic as it looks to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 and also to the events at the end of the world. Additionally, Matthew 24 looks back at Antiochus as a figure of antichrists to come.

So verses 36-39 tell about this end times sort of ruler. He will act according to his own will, similar to the kings before. He will even exalt himself above every god. He will prosper until the indignation is accomplished. Which sounds very similar to Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 4. He will honor the god of fortresses. He will be a man of war. He will greatly reward those who serve him.

Then starting with verse 40 we hear about his conquest and fall. The north and the south rage again, but this king passes over all. In verse 41, he comes into the glorious land, Israel, and kills tens of thousands. Some evil people escape; notice that the tribes mentioned are usually considered evil in scripture. Verses 42-43 says the great nation of Egypt will be conquered and the king will gain much wealth. Many will suffer destruction and yet, look at the end of verse 45. Even this greatest tyrant will come to his end, with none to help.

But that's not the end. The credits haven't started rolling. Read with me starting in 12:1.

Daniel 12:1-4

¹At 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. ²And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. ³And 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. ⁴But you, Daniel, shut up the words and seal the book, until the time of the end. Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase.

At the time of the end there will be intensified trouble. Worse than even Antiochus could come up with. But just as trouble intensifies so does the deliverance.

Here we have one of the clearest descriptions of resurrection in the Old Testament. Notice all of humanity is included in this resurrection. Some will rise to eternal life and others to everlasting contempt. This description of bodily resurrection is unparalleled in the Old Testament.

And look again at the word of encouragement to the wise—the ones who put their ultimate trust and allegiance in God and didn't place their trust in the powers and politics of man. Those who didn't compromise but stood firm, endured, and pursued righteousness. Those who called others to righteousness and holiness.

Compared to the darkness of all that has passed, they will shine like the brightness of the sky above.

You see, our hope in this life is in the life to come. The hope of resurrection provides more than just a reason for not fearing death. Resurrection motivates us to live lives of holiness before God. We

don't have to get wrapped up in the endless pursuit of power because God will make all things new. We don't have to give in to the seductions of our world because something better is waiting for us. Sin and evil don't have to cause fear because they will be done away with.

Peter says it this way in the New Testament: "Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness ... But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace" (2 Pet. 3:11, 13-14).

In the light of resurrection we can confidently live according to God's kingdom no matter which kingdom of man reigns. Because only one kingdom promises to be eternal.

For Daniel it seemed like a long ways off. But we've seen the beginnings of this resurrection—the life to come. Jesus is a foretaste of the resurrection. And through his death and resurrection we've been made new even as we await the fullness of new life to come.

And if we want to be wise in our own time we need to see how Jesus provides an assured promise in the midst of futile worldly powers. Jesus is our ultimate loyalty. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. A life everlasting.

Resurrection is the end Daniel was searching for. A kingdom that will not end. A kingdom of peace. A kingdom where evil is gone and the world is restored and reconciled. This is the end Daniel has been concerned about and longing for chapter after chapter.

And it's the ending we long for as well. That our current struggles and conflict will not last forever. Something better awaits. For the end of time is really only the beginning.

Just as C.S. Lewis writes in *The Last Battle*, "All their life in this world and all their adventures had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."

Prayer

Father, you are the author of life, life everlasting. In a world of conflict and strife when we are often tossed about, give a firm foundation in you. May our hope in resurrection motivate us to stand firm, not to compromise our faith in our culture or current situation, not to put our hope in the tactics or strategies of the world. May we be wise and fear the Lord above all.

In Christ I pray, Amen.