

## 25<sup>th</sup> August 2024 – Daniel 12 ‘Go your way, Daniel’

We live in unsettling times. At any point in time nowadays there seems to be so much change, so many crises, so many things we can't really understand. Let's take a week of news in July, for example. On 17<sup>th</sup> July major floods swept across southern Asia, affecting Afghanistan, India, Nepal and Bangladesh. We've got used to these extreme events happening more often, but even so, every time it happens it causes us to shudder, and another major relief operation is rapidly assembled.

Then on 21<sup>st</sup> July, President Joe Biden indicated that he's standing down in November – this in itself is ultimately the response to the tumultuous events of eight days previously, when presidential candidate Donald Trump survived an assassination attempt.

The following day, Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> July, was the hottest day ever recorded on earth, in terms of average temperature. This broke the record that had stood for precisely one day – beating Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> July 2024. The previous hottest day ever was in July 2023, and in fact every month for the last year has been the hottest month ever recorded for that time of year. And by the way, if you're wondering how we can know how warm the earth was thousands of years ago, ironically we can thank ice for that. The permafrost in the Arctic and Antarctic regions allows us to determine very accurately the temperature of the earth for the last million years – it's all about the isotopic content of water molecules at any given depth of the ice.

Finally on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2024, the US, UK and EU issued a joint statement about the development of Artificial Intelligence, including some of the risks it posed, if left unregulated.

I haven't even mentioned the wars, the dictators, the droughts, the deadly viruses, the unprecedented levels of refugees across the world or the fact that Joe Root and Harry Brook both scored hundreds that week as England won the second test against the West Indies.

**The point is – where does it all lead? Where does it all end? Are we living in what the bible calls the End Times** – moving towards that moment when God finally intervenes for good, brings an end to all the chaos and judges all things? A study in 2022 indicated that 39% of all Americans, and more than half of committed Christians in the USA, now believe we're in the End Times. Certainly we're facing challenges we've never faced before – in particular, the human effect on the climate, the growing risk of collapse of global ecosystems, and technology which is advancing so rapidly we can't keep up with it. And that's on top of things that humanity has long faced: natural disasters, deadly viruses and the battles of nations and powers against each other.

How do we as Christians address these questions? Do we stick our heads in the sand and hope it all goes away? Do we spend hours watching crazy Youtube videos trying to crack hidden bible codes or, worse, feeding our heads with conspiracy theories? Do we medicate ourselves with pleasure or prescriptions?

We could do a lot worse than go back to these final verses of Daniel for some real wisdom. **And let's start by acknowledging that wondering about the future and where it's all going is nothing new. 2,500 years ago, Daniel was preoccupied with those same questions.** His people were in exile, world powers were shifting unpredictably as the Babylonians faded and the Medes and Persians took their place. Everything seemed chaotic, and to cap it all, in his later years Daniel started having disturbing visions about yet more disasters and challenges to come. Most of chapters Daniel 7-11 describe various calamities and catastrophes in extraordinarily vivid language. There are beasts and horns and battles – God's people seem tossed about in the storm of world events and unscrupulous rulers – just what is going on?

Let's emphasise again that Daniel is *not* a code book for the end times. Prophetic language is often vague, and for a reason. It's a painting using great big brush strokes, not a close-up photograph. We've already looked at how much of it refers primarily to a particular period of Jewish history in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century BC.

However, towards the end of ch11, it seems to go much further, extending its gaze well beyond this particular set of events. There are numerous echoes of Jesus' own prophetic vision recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21, which is commonly taken to refer to the Jewish rebellion of the late 60s AD that led to the catastrophic destruction of the temple in AD70. But, as with Jesus' prophecy, what Daniel sees here 'spills over' into something much bigger, which appears to talk about the very end of time. Somehow the smaller scale judgements and reckonings fuse together into a bigger vision of the final reckoning of all things, or what we might call the Day of Judgement.

It is fascinating to observe that today's passage, which is almost never read in any church or by most Christians, is not only referred to directly by Jesus but also referenced in lots of much better known passages in the new Testament – not just in Revelation, but in Paul's letters: the image in verse 2 of those who sleep awakening to eternal life is in Paul's earliest letter of 1 Thessalonians chapter 4; or the famous image of God's people 'shining like stars' in one of his late letters, Philippians, is inspired by verse 3 here.

Nevertheless, the heavenly being who gave Daniel this vision also admitted that, despite its importance, it won't prevent others from looking for insight into these eternal realities in all kinds of other places: (v4) 'Many will go here and there to increase knowledge.' For the seers and soothsayers of 500BC, think wellness gurus and Youtuber content creators in the 21<sup>st</sup> century!

'Twas ever thus – and so it remains. Interest in the 'end of all things' is a human preoccupation: and yet here, more than 2,000 years ago, we get amazing insights. The great value of this kind of prophecy is that it focuses us on the essentials, those precious and profound truths, more precious than gold in every age, truths about the nature of humanity but even more importantly about the nature of God; so, we learn in these last verses of Daniel, as we have throughout the book, that: **humans will always lust for power... but God is in control** – always has been, always will be. And, second, that **life will always have its challenges, especially for God's people – the Lord promises not so much to protect us from danger but to protect us in danger – but those who are God's will rise to eternal life with him** – even shining like the stars!

We may not fathom much else, but surely this is what we *need* to know! This is what keeps us sane in the madness and the chaos around us. This allows us both to acknowledge that we may be in the End Times, but whether we are or we aren't, we hang on to fundamental realities that remain true, that give us peace, hope, purpose, confidence and, dare I say it, even joy.

And as Daniel's final vision concludes, a character in the vision asks the one question most of us would ask: (v6) 'how long will it be before these astonishing things are fulfilled?' The answer is designed to discourage that question: (v7) 'a time, times and half a time.' (v7) In other words, it is not given for us to know *when* these things will take place, only to be aware that they *will* at some point. **So how do we live in the now? The final advice given to Daniel is ours, too: 'Go your way.'** In fact, it is sufficiently important to receive this advice that Daniel hears it twice (v9, v13). What does it mean? Each word matters:

**Go:** don't hide away wondering what it all means, get on with the business of living and loving and serving the Lord. **Your:** which in Daniel's case means 'God's', since that is the way he had so clearly aligned himself with. God is still in control and will continue to lead us on. **Way:** Daniel knew the path he was destined to follow, he had walked it for 80 or more years. And many years later, the true king he had seen in a vision – the Son of Man – came among us, declaring 'I am the Way.' Those who came to put their trust in him were called 'Followers of the Way.' Go your way, Daniel, till the end. *Keep going your way.*

We too are called to 'go our way' – the way of life, the way of the cross, the way of Christ. There are – and will be – many things we do not understand, but in this crazy world *this* we know: the Most High is sovereign over all the earth, and those who faithfully walk in his way will be blessed (v12), 'purified, made spotless and refined' (v10) and 'will rise to receive [our] allotted inheritance' (v13). Hallelujah! Amen.