

History in the Making

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Preacher: Jonathan de Groot

[0 : 0 0] Okay, last week, tennis player Venus Williams told an umpire, I can't control God. She was given a time violation because the winds were blowing and she took too long to serve, and so the umpire gave her this violation.

And she confronted the umpire and said, I'm just saying that if the wind blows, there's nothing I can do about that. I can't control God. Talk to him, she said as she walked off, pointing to the sky.

After claiming to have received some unwanted divine intervention, she then went on to lose the match. Again, last week, Liverpool goalkeeper, Alison, he also claimed to have some divine intervention in a football match after scoring a remarkable 95th minute winner, a glancing header.

He said, God put his hand on my head today. So interesting, isn't it? One claiming divine intervention went against him, and the other claiming divine intervention went for them.

And it is interesting because when it comes to God, we might wonder the extent to which God works in our world and works in our lives. How much does he control?

[1 : 1 5] How much does he get involved in what is going on in our lives or in our world? And so whether we're here today and we call ourselves a Christian or not, or even if we just aren't sure what we believe when it comes to God, we probably would like to know the extent to which God controls what goes on and what happens.

Well, this long reading from Daniel chapter 11 actually gives us an insight into this. It's a long passage simply because it's a detailed prophecy about the future and about the future in terms of the end of the world.

And it shows us that God is in control of all the details of history right up to the very end. And it's important that we get this, because if we are one of God's people, if we call ourselves a Christian, then we are going to suffer.

That's what this passage, that's what the apocalyptic literature at the end of Daniel is telling us. God's people must suffer. And so if God's people are going to suffer, then God's people need to know that God is in control.

Now, there's an extraordinary amount of detail in this chapter. So how do we approach it when we read it together? Well, we don't want Daniel chapter 11 to be some kind of boring history lesson with all the details.

[2 : 3 9] For example, one commentator said of this chapter, a guy called H.C. Leopold, he said, we do not see how it could be used for a sermon or for sermons.

So he bailed out altogether. I didn't think he should preach on this passage. Whereas John Calvin gave nine lectures on Daniel chapter 11. So he got a bit carried away with it.

So we're basically going to land somewhere between those two extremes. If you play golf, then you'll know how easy it is to get distracted from the aim of the game, which is to get your ball in the hole in the shortest or fewest amount of shots possible.

But you can get stuck in the rough. You can get stuck in the bunker and miss the fairway. And that's where you want your ball to be landing. And so in Daniel chapter 11, what we want to do is really stay on the fairway, not to be hacking around for too long in the rough.

So two points this afternoon. They're either on the screen. First of all, we want to see the vision, which is God's people will suffer. And secondly, we want to get the point, which is God controls human history.

[3 : 42] See the vision, God's people will suffer and get the point. God controls human history. So first, let's see the vision, which is God's people will suffer. Daniel chapters 10 to 12 contain the fourth and the final vision in the book of Daniel.

So it's running from 10 to 12. Last week, we saw the introduction in chapter 10. And today we're going to see the content of this vision. And it prophesies the suffering of God's people in the future.

It's like God hands Daniel a telescope. And Daniel can look through the telescope. He can gaze into the future. And as he gazes, he can see three horizons in view.

So the first horizon is verse 2 to verse 20. This is near Eastern history. And it looks forward to from the time of Daniel up to the second century.

And then the second view is chapter 11, verse 21 to 35. And this focuses on somebody called Antiochus the fourth epiphanies. We saw him in chapter eight.

[4 : 45] And this is a time of the second century BC before Christ. And then the third horizon in view is from verse 36 in chapter 12. And then, sorry, 36 in chapter 11 into chapter 12.

And this describes the time of the end. So Daniel is able to see the near future and then away future, which is our future too.

So let's see. First of all, there's the near horizon. This is verse 2 to verse 20. And it is meticulously recorded in great detail. And when we read what is here in the Bible and match it with other documented, recorded histories of the time, it matches up.

It's exactly the same. So this is a reliable historical document. Yet it wasn't written as history. It was written as prophecy foretelling what would come in the future.

And if we did know our Persian and Greek history far better, some people will know it, then we could identify the events and the characters who are outlined here. And so we began with the kings of Persia and the Persian Empire.

[5 : 54] They're in verse 2. And then it moves on to Greece, verse 3 and 4. And then verse 3, the Greek conqueror or the mighty king who's mentioned there is Alexander the Great.

We read about him in chapter 8, famous in world history. His kingdom was powerful, but his empire was broken up into four kingdoms. It's mentioned in verse 4.

And then when we go to verse 5 to verse 20, we've got about 150 years of battles between the kings of the south and the kings of the north. So this is the original game of thrones here.

The kings of the south had their power base in Egypt, known as the Ptolemy dynasty. And then the kings of the north had their power base in Syria, known as the Seleucid dynasty.

And if you know your Middle Eastern geography, then Israel-Palestine, much on the news this past week, is in the middle of these two, kings of the north and the kings of the south.

[6 : 54] And it's referred to as the beautiful land. They're in verse 16 and then in verse 41. So God's people, if you like, are wedged between these two hostile powers who are fighting against one another.

So remember, this is prophecy for Daniel, but it's history for us. And yet it tells us something that is always true about human power and about political rule.

And that is that the seat of power shifts continually. Some state, dynasty, kingdom, empire may have the power, but it is short-lived until someone else comes along and takes the power from them.

And power shifts through force, through alliances, through scheming, and it never settles. We've just had a general election and power just seems to shift back and forth.

And often it doesn't achieve much, which is the case here. And so up to verse 20, we can trace the history from Daniel to 175 BC.

[8 : 00] And eventually the north prevailed and then a new king appears in the scene. And so the focus switches to a single Seleucid ruler from verse 21.

Verse 21 says, He will be succeeded by a contemptible person who has not been given the honour of royalty. He will invade the kingdom when its people feel secure and he will seize it through intrigue.

So he's described as a contemptible person because he's the most wicked ruler of them all. This is Antiochus IV Epiphanes, a figure in history.

And he was the little horn if you were here when we looked at Daniel chapter 8. And he gave himself the nickname Epiphanes, which means God manifest. So you can tell what kind of person he is, wants to set himself up against God.

And he reigned from 175 to 164 BC. And he really dominates the passage from verse 21 to 35. And it's not because he was particularly significant in history.

[9 : 03] You've probably never heard of him. But it's because he set himself up against God and he brutally treated God's people. And that's why he comes up here in this vision in our Bibles.

And so when we read about his heart being set against the Holy Covenant, verse 28, or venting his fury against the Holy Covenant in verse 30, we're being told of his determination to exterminate the Jewish religion, to get rid of God's people, to stop the worship of God in this beautiful place, the beautiful land, which is Jerusalem.

So verse 31 tells us his armed forces will rise up to desecrate the temple fortress and will abolish the daily sacrifice. Then they will set up the abomination that causes desolation.

Okay, so we know from here in the Bible, from other sources, that Antiochus banned the offerings and the sacrifices at the temple. And he sacrificed to pigs instead.

He desecrated the most holy place, the holy of holies, and he dedicated the temple to the worship of Zeus, the false god. And so the temple was desecrated in 168 BC as he was attempting to destroy the faith of the people of God.

[10 : 24] And that's the abomination that causes desolation. That's picked up and mentioned here in verse 31. Okay, hopefully you're still tracking with all of this. It's tough stuff, but all of this has happened already.

This is history for us. And yet in this telescopic vision that Daniel has of the future, there is another horizon in view. And that is the horizon of the end of history.

So we've looked at history. Now we're looking at the future, at what is to come. So in a sense, the vision pans over history, and it points forward to this final horizon at the very end to fulfill what will happen and what is to come in the future.

And we see this in the transition from Antiochus Epiphanes, there in verse 21 to 35. He transitions into a far more wicked figure in verse 36 to 45.

So 36 says, Okay, so this figure continues in opposition to God, but he has larger than life characteristics.

[11 : 51] In other words, the prophecy is not exhausted on the figure of Antiochus Epiphanes. He is evil, but he's pointing to a greater evil figure to come.

And Jesus helps us understand this in the New Testament, because when Jesus speaks about the future, he points back to the prophecy of Daniel. So in Matthew chapter 24, verse 15, Jesus says, So when you see standing in the holy place, the abomination that causes desolation, spoken of through the prophet Daniel, let the reader understand.

And then Jesus goes on and speaks about how dreadful the events will be in the future before he returns. And so in picking up on this abomination that causes desolation from Daniel, Jesus talks as if this is something that is yet to come.

Jesus is speaking of a similarly horrifying event that would happen again. And it did happen in AD 70 when the Romans desecrated the temple in Jerusalem.

So the prophecy was fulfilled shortly after the death and resurrection of Jesus. But it's a prophecy that has multiple fulfillment. And so it still has to be fully filled in the future.

[13 : 15] It's a prophecy, but it's not fulfilled. The fulfillment is happening, has happened, and will happen. And that's why these verses at the end of Daniel chapter 11 also refer to the Antichrist, to the ultimate fulfillment of opposition to God and evil towards God's people.

And so 1 John chapter 2 says, Dear children, this is the last hour. And as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many Antichrists have come.

This is how we know it is the last hour. So Antiochus the fourth epiphanies was one of many who'd come before and have come since and will continue to come until the final Antichrist at the end.

And so this vision really is like a window onto history, which is in fact church history. All history is church history. Because what we're reading here about the character of evil is that it expresses itself again and again and again against God and against God's people in every age.

And it will do so right up to the very end. That's what verse 40 is saying there. At the time of the end, the king of the south will engage in battle. Okay, so how does this apply to us?

[14 : 36] Well, you might say that's very interesting. I used to love history at school. And I just love hearing about kings and dynasties and battles and fights and wars. And that is just that itches where I scratch or scratches where I itch.

Or you might be thinking, well, I don't care much about history. What has all this got to do with me? Well, we need to see from all of this that God's people will suffer.

God's people have always suffered and God's people always will suffer. Whether it be at the brutal hands of a wicked ruler like Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the second century BC or whether it be at any other point throughout history, the fact is God's people will suffer.

And so if you're a Christian, that means that you will suffer because of your faith in God. And so just like Antiochus is a type of Antichrist, so the suffering in this vision is a type of the suffering that God's people, the church, will face all the way through history.

Now, of course, the book of Daniel is known for its amazing rescue stories, isn't it? The rescue of God's people. Remember, chapter 3, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego rescued amazingly from the fiery furnace.

[15 : 57] Then chapter 6, Daniel rescued from the lion's den. Another amazing miracle, God intervening in a miraculous way. And sometimes that happens, and it did here.

But very often, that doesn't happen. Often, the reality for God's people is more like what we read here in Daniel chapter 11. So verse 33, those who are wise will instruct many, though for a time they will fall by the sword or be burned or captured or plundered.

Okay, that's a bit of Daniel that they don't include in children's illustrated Bibles. And yet, God's people will suffer and they will die for staying faithful to God.

Suffering and death is normal in church history. It's normal for the church. In fact, Tertullian, who was one of the early church fathers, said in the second century that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

And so there is always this spiritual battle raging on, which we thought about last week. And it will always rage on. There will always be anti-Christ opposition to God and persecution of God's people right up to the very end.

[17 : 22] And so if you're a professing Christian, if you are a Christ follower today, you need to remember the devastating reality of this vision, whether you've experienced suffering for your faith or not.

The brutality of Daniel chapter 11 is a reality for many Christians across the world today. Listen to the stories reported this week by the Barnabas Fund to support the persecuted church.

These are headlines. Pakistani Christian nurses fear for lives after accusation of blasphemy. Church vandalized during terrorist attack in Niger.

Islamist terrorists killed four Christian farmers in Indonesia. They were attacked by five men wielding swords, apparently. So can you see the spirit of the Antichrist is alive and well and manifold and in multiple ways in our world today.

Even here in the West, in our own land of Scotland. In our community group this week on Thursday night, we said that we wouldn't be surprised that if in our lifetime, some of us ended up prosecuted or put in prison because of our faith in God.

[18 : 47] That might seem far-fetched, might seem unreal, and yet isn't that the way it seems to be going? Who knows what will happen? The opposition is definitely more subtle in our own land, but it is there and it is increasingly becoming more severe.

And that's why these startling visions in Daniel should be a reality check for us. They show us that it is not unusual for God's people to suffer and even to die for their faith in Jesus.

So that's the first thing. Let's see the vision. God's people will suffer. Let's get that. And the second, let's get the point. The point is that God controls human history.

That's what this whole lengthy vision is all about. And it's obvious in the detailed foretelling of what's going to happen in the future and what's going to happen at the end.

And so God is in control of the big picture of history. But this vision shows us that God is in control of the fine details too. So it's not as if God just paints on the canvas of history with big, broad brush strokes.

[20 : 03] God also points with fine, small detail. And that's clear in the details of the kings of the south and the north. There's mention of their riches, their strengths, their weaknesses, the division of their kingdoms, their alliances, their daughters, their sons, their marriages, their betrayals, their victories, their defeats, their successes, their failures, their false gods, their fortresses, their armies, their pride, their brutality, their schemes, their deceit, and so on and so on.

And it's all so detailed. And we've got to remember that all of this was revealed by God to Daniel hundreds of years before it happened.

And so the lives of men and women, their comings and their goings, their characters and their conduct, it is all foretold by God to Daniel.

And it's showing us that God is sovereign. It means he is in control over everything, over history, but also over individual lives as well, like yours and like mine.

In fact, the prophecy here is so detailed that some scholars think this couldn't possibly have been true. It must have been written after these events rather than prophesying them in the future.

[21 : 28] And they think it's got to be history rather than prophecy. But the words here actually reassure God's people that God is in control even when they're suffering.

And that's why this vision doesn't just relate to Daniel and God's people back then, but it's a vision that applies to God's people past, present, and future. And so this prophecy doesn't take away the need for faith in God.

It ought to strengthen our faith in God when we see the control that God actually has. Because we're reassured that whatever happens, it happens according to God's timescale.

In other words, God knows exactly what he's doing. God is never caught out. God is never wrong-footed. He is in charge. God rules. That's the series title for our study in Daniel.

And because God rules, that's why we find in this chapter this repeated mention of the phrase at the appointed time. It's there three times. See verse 27, at the appointed time.

[22 : 37] Then verse 29, at the appointed time. Then verse 35, at the appointed time. And then verse 36, for what has been determined must take place.

Okay, so Antiochus fiercely opposed God's people, but we're told it wasn't out of control. God was working out his timetable. The point is that God is in control of human history.

Not kings, or dynasties, or political maneuvering, but God. God writes the pages of human history. In effect, history is his story.

And God establishes his everlasting kingdom as we live our lives and as this world keeps spinning until the end. God is working all things together to bring about his perfect kingdom at the end.

And that's why we can totally trust that God knows exactly what he is doing in our world and in our lives. And that doesn't mean that we're all pre-programmed as if we're robots who must act in certain ways and we are unable to make our choices or decisions in life.

[23 : 55] Because Daniel 11 shows us that it is real human beings who are making real human decisions that involve them in the real events of history. And yet it all works out under the sovereign control of God.

And we don't know how, we're not told how, but God does. And isn't that a good thing? That God does know what he is doing. But the world is not spinning out of control.

That is our only hope for the future. That God is in control. And that is where this vision ends up. It ends up in the future at the end where God controls what will happen.

So opposition to God, persecution of God's people will continue to rumble on through history right up to the very end. Sin and evil and wickedness will continue.

But we're told there is a definite end point. God will one day stop it. verse 45, the end of the chapter is a great verse.

[25 : 01] He will pitch his royal tents between the seas at the beautiful holy mountain, yet he will come to his end and no one will help him. Strong words, but words assuring us that the Antichrist will eventually be destroyed.

God will have the final say because God is in control. And so what does that mean for us? How does it apply to our lives right now?

Well it means the same for us as it meant for Daniel's original readers because it shows us how we should respond to the reality of the suffering that we will face for having faith in God.

And what's the response? It's there in verse 32. With flattery he will corrupt those who have violated the covenant but the people who know their God will firmly resist him.

Another translation, the ESV says, but the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action. So Daniel wants his audience to know God and stand firm because it's only those who really know God who will stand firm.

[26 : 19] That's the key. That's the key to the whole passage. Know God. We need to know God and that is what life is all about. Do we know the God we read about in Daniel?

The God of the Bible because he has revealed himself to us. He has revealed his purposes to us so that we might know him. So do you know God?

Do I know God? Not do I know about God. Not do I know about the Bible. Not do I come to church every Sunday.

Not have I been brought up in a Christian family. But do I know God? When it comes to the end and your funeral, what will the people standing around your grave say about you?

Well, they say in the words of Daniel chapter 11 verse 32 that here is a person who knew their God. that is what it is all about and that is all that counts at the end of the day.

[27 : 25] Am I in a relationship with God? Do I worship him? Do I obey him? Do I honor him? Do I serve him? Do I love him? If we really know him, then we will.

And the better we know our God, the better we will be able to stand firm in the face of suffering, whatever shape or form that suffering takes. Because if we don't know our God, then we are going to struggle when suffering comes our way.

Isn't that what the vision says? Verse 31 and 32. His armed forces will rise up to desecrate the temple fortress and will abolish the daily sacrifice.

Then he will set up the abomination that causes desolation. With flattery he will corrupt those who have violated the covenant. Antiochus used two things.

He used force and he used flattery against God's people. Now force is an obvious way to stop God's people from worshipping him. And states across the world will use force threatening to kill Christians if they continue to worship God.

[28 : 31] But flattery is much more subtle, isn't it? Antiochus was able to flatter some of God's people in order to corrupt them. He got them on side, making them think that life would be better for them if they just weren't so serious about their faith.

That they could live in the world and do all the things the world does, but don't be so serious about trusting in God. And it's straight out of the Garden of Eden, this kind of tactic.

Remember Satan, the devil, tempted the first woman to disobey God and eat the fruit from the tree and said, you will not certainly die, for God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened and you'll be like God, knowing good and evil.

And Adam and Eve fell for it. And that's always been the evil one's tactic. It works to make us think that we are autonomous, that we ourselves are like God and so we can do what we want to do.

And so flattering voices will try to get God's people to compromise and saying to us that we don't need to take our faith so seriously. And it will come in the workplace.

[29 : 47] And if you're a young person it will come when you go to school. People will say, you don't really need to believe all that stuff. You'll lose friends if you believe what the Bible says about God or about sex or Jesus or heaven or hell or marriage or gender.

You just need to keep your faith quiet. Don't give up your faith altogether. Just keep it private. Don't be too public in what you say or in what you do.

But just go and do your own thing because that promotion you'd like to get, well you won't get it if you keep expressing those kinds of views in polite society.

Do you want to keep friends? Do you want to be part of the group? Well forget about God. Forget about being so expressive with how you live your life.

And all of this flows from this anti-God, anti-Christ agenda that has always been in the world. And so don't be surprised when you're rejected by the world because you do stay faithful to God.

[31 : 00] There will always be pressure to compromise in your workplace, in your school, in your university. Always be pressured to compromise and just conform to the world, to let the world squeeze you into its mould, to flatter you, to say you could be this kind of person if you forget that faith.

And yet, when we know our God, we're told that we must stand firm and we must resist, even if it means death.

And that sounds crazy, doesn't it? That you need to be prepared to die for your faith in God. And yet, that is the wise way to live. Just look at verse 33.

Those who are wise will instruct many, though for a time they will fall by the sword or be burned or captured or plundered. That is the wise way to live, to be ready to die, because with Jesus Christ, we are living for something that is beyond this material world that we can see.

We're living for something far greater and far more enduring than anything that this world can offer. And so how are we able to live this way?

[32 : 20] Well, it's not just by seeing the vision and getting the point, because while all the powers of evil will continue to trample the church today, we will feel the heat and the pressure will be coming with increasing ferocity until the end.

And yet God still controls human history. He still controls it even if it seems otherwise. And it's illustrated in this vision. And yet it is supremely displayed in history when Jesus Christ died.

That's how we know that God is in control, because that is the greatest act in the drama of God's purposes for this world. That is the point at which all of history converges.

It converges at the cross of Jesus Christ. And that's why we've got to read this final vision in Daniel in the light of the life and death and resurrection and return of Jesus, because it's through the death and resurrection of Jesus that God defeated the enemies of Satan and sin and death.

And so while the death of Jesus may have looked as if God wasn't in control, in reality God was achieving his great purposes for this world and for our lives.

[33 : 39] And those purposes will reach their completion when Jesus Christ returns. And so the good news is that Jesus doesn't just save us in this life for eternity, but he enables us to persevere as well.

the writer to the Hebrews says this in chapter 12, and with this we finish. Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

And so when we consider what Jesus Christ has done through his opposition and suffering and death for us, we won't grow weary and lose heart. We will fix our eyes on Jesus and we'll keep going.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.