

The People who know their God

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[0 : 00] Now, before we come to Daniel 12, let's have a moment of prayer. Father, as we draw near to you, we pray that you will most graciously draw near to us.

We pray that you will open your word to our hearts and minds, and that you will open our hearts and minds to your word. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, we ask this. Amen.

The people who know their God, that's the title of our study this morning. People who know their God. And if you go to the middle of Edinburgh and drive up the mound, you'll see on top of it a building which some people think looks romantic, other people think looks simply dirty. But it is a very impressive Gothic building with two towers which houses New College, which is the Edinburgh School of Divinity, and also houses the Assembly Hall where the Church of Scotland meets in General Assembly.

That was where, a good number of years ago, I studied for the ministry. Now, underneath that building, there is a little chapel, which used to be a church in the 19th century.

And on that chapel, there are words printed in the language of the Authorised Version, words printed from Daniel chapter 12 and verse 3. Let me read them to you.

[1 : 39] They who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever.

This was a place I would often go to in times of difficulty, in times of trouble, in times when I needed to reflect, in times when I needed to remember what I was there for.

And during that time, when I was at New College, I also attended Holyrood Abbey. And in the last few weeks, it struck me again and again that there is no one who more exemplifies those words than James Philip.

Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above, and those who turn many to righteousness like stars forever and ever.

Those who are wise.

[3 : 00] Now, Daniel speaks this at the time of exile in the 6th century, a time when all the bases of Israel's faith was brought into question.

Why did the Lord, who had brought them out of Egypt, allow them to be taken to Babylon? Why did he allow his temple to be destroyed? Why did he allow his nation to be defeated? And that's the question that Daniel is answering.

And he's also looking forward to a period beyond his own time, 400 years later, to another time when the people of God were going to be in great trouble, when the Syrian king Antiochus invaded the land and took over the city of Jerusalem and tried to turn it into a Greek city, stamping out the worship of the true God, killing those who opposed him.

And that was a period from 167 to 164 BC, a period of roughly three and a half years, when the testimony of God was almost stamped out.

Now, the important thing about that period is the prophets, the apocalyptic writers, as happens in Revelation as well, take that as a window into all periods when the people of God are under persecution.

[4 : 17] Indeed, the whole of the last days, the period in which we're living between the comings of Christ. At the end of these three and a half years, the temple was cleansed and the great Judas Maccabeus drove out the Syrians.

And the Hanukkah festival was established to remember those days, the lighting of the lamps.

Those of you familiar with the diary of Anne Frank may remember that very moving time when the Jews, hidden in the attic in Amsterdam, celebrated the Hanukkah festival and called on the God of their fathers.

And that explains the curious phrase in verse 7, the time, times and half a time, which is the prophetic way of talking about those three and a half years.

And then the 1290 days in verse 11 and the 1335 in verse 12, which are roughly three and a half years.

So what Daniel is saying is, at that time, and many times before it, there will be times of great persecution, times of great trouble, times when the people of God will be all but destroyed.

[5 : 29] And when these times happen, those who are wise, those who know their God will stand out. So what marks those people who are wise?

What marks those people who know their God? I want to suggest three things. I'm not going to attempt a full exposition of this chapter. But what I want to do is to take particularly verse 3 and look at it and see what marks those people.

First of all, the wise, the people who know their God, on that day will be fully all that they were created to be. Now let me explain what I mean.

There are two expressions which remind us of the very earliest chapters of the Bible. Verse 2, many who sleep in the dust of the earth. And then verse 3, the brightness of the sky.

The old versions say the firmament. This is in the creation story. God created the sky. God created the firmament. Those who sleep in the dust remind us that God is going to reverse the ancient curse.

[6 : 34] Death itself is going to be destroyed. And when that happens, those who have been wise will be seen to have been wise. See, at the moment it's not altogether easy to see who is wise and who is not wise.

So many voices speak. So many agendas clamor for attention. But on that day there will be no doubt. And they will shine like the brightness of the stars.

Like the stars forever and ever. That's fascinating. The letter of Jude calls false teachers wandering stars. Shooting stars who shine for a time and then disappear.

These stars will shine forever and ever. And the reason they will shine forever and ever is because they have faithfully, loyally, persistently, and uncompromisingly proclaimed the gospel.

The unchanging gospel. And in the new Jerusalem they will shine brightly like the skies above. So let's say the background to that is the time of trouble.

[7 : 39] Now the whole course of the history of God's people has been marked by trouble. And we know from the Barnabas Fund and other agencies that many Christians, many of our brothers and sisters, are to this very day suffering times of trouble.

Devil-inspired times of trouble. But the book of Daniel does appear to talk that at the time of the end, this is confirmed in Revelation, there will be a particular outpouring of that trouble.

Now of course that doesn't help us to date the time of the coming. Because we don't know whether any particular time of trouble is the end, the time of trouble.

But the important thing is that all the way through, God is in charge. Michael, the great prince Michael, the archangel, protects God's people. And incidentally, we need to thank God more than we do for the ministry of angels.

The ministry of angels is so important. Read Psalm 103 later on, the last verses. Angels are mighty ones who do God's bidding, who carry out his word.

[8 : 49] And one of the tasks of the teachers of God's word is to open people's eyes to this reality. The reality that ministering spirits, as Hebrew calls them, legions of angels, are protecting us in this world.

That doesn't mean we'll go through the world unscathed. It doesn't mean that we'll have no troubles. What it does mean is that the end is certain. The destiny is secure.

Shall awake, we are told, verse 2, to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Now you see, this is the gospel once again.

The gospel, if it's obeyed, the gospel if it's believed, the gospel if it's practiced, leads to everlasting life and to rejoicing. But it was rejected. It leads to shame and everlasting contempt.

Incidentally, don't believe those who say there is no view of life after death in the Old Testament.

There are plenty of places, and this is one of the clearest, where the Old Testament clearly points to conscious life after death and to two different destinies.

[9 : 55] Obviously, until Jesus Christ dies and rises again, there are many things we don't know. There is still a great deal of mystery. But turning many to righteousness surely is anticipating the

world to come.

Because as God's kingdom comes in the hearts and lives of people, we're already seeing glimpses of that kingdom that is to come. As people shine, as Paul says in Philippians, and I think Paul is echoing this passage in Daniel, shining like lights in the world, shining like stars.

And as the gospel grows, every person who comes to the Lord Jesus Christ begins to shine like a star and anticipate that day of full reality.

And until that day, we will never realise fully what has been achieved for the kingdom. You can see some things, you can see some evidence, but at the moment, as Peter says, it's a light shining in a dark place.

So what's the first thing about those who are wise? They will achieve the full purpose of which they are created. They will not be left to sleep in the dust. They will shine forever and ever like the stars of heaven.

[11:10] But the second thing is these people, as they live on earth, will pass on the message. In 11 verse 33, and we didn't have time to read chapter 11, it's a very long chapter, but in a sense chapters 10, 11 and 12 are really all part of one great vision, the final vision in the book.

In 11 verse 33, the wise among the people shall make them understand. The NIV says the wise among the people will instruct many. Now you see the importance of not just knowing the message, but of passing it on.

Because what marks the wise in their lifetime here in the world is that they pass on that message. As I say, they themselves, as they shine like stars, if you like, ignite others, and the lights keep on shining, the lights keep on growing.

Now, what is Daniel telling us about that message that we pass on? He's telling us two things, I think. First of all, it is enough to live by.

Verse 10 of this chapter, Many shall purify themselves and make themselves white and be refined, but the wicked shall act wickedly, and none of the wicked shall understand, but those who are wise shall understand.

[12:26] In other words, there is always enough revelation given for us to live godly lives. And those who are wise do not understand. Now, that doesn't just mean not understanding the words that are spoken.

Many very intelligent people hear the message, they're attracted to it even, and then there comes a point when they withdraw, because it's a costly message, it's going to make demands on their lives. This happens over and over again. So, we have enough to live by. Enough so that we can make ourselves white and be refined.

In other words, this message is not just one that brings us to saving faith, it's one which gives us enough to live by. Peter says in his second letter, everything we need for life and godliness.

And we have that in the word of the apostles and the prophets. And this is a prolonged time, but a limited time, the time, times, and half a time of verse 7. That time continues until Christ returns.

[13:32] The time, times, and half a time, when the shattering of the power of the holy people comes to an end. In other words, when the persecution, the ridicule, all the opposition to the gospel will cease.

But during that time, this message needs to be preached. And as Paul says, it needs to be preached in season and out of season. That's to say, when it's wanted and when it's not wanted. So, we have enough to live by. But secondly, there is still mystery. Look at verse 4. You, Daniel, shut up the words and seal the book until the time of the end.

Daniel did not understand all the revelation he was given. He understood enough to live the godly life he did. And the revelation we've been given is enough for us to live.

But we won't understand everything. Only after the outcome will the full truth be revealed. And notice, Daniel says in verse 8, I did not understand.

[14:33] Even though we have now the full revelation of the prophets and the apostles, even though we have the whole canon of scripture, there are still unanswered questions.

There are still things we do not know. One of the things I really admired about James Phillips' ministry was he avoided a foolish dogmatism on matters which the Bible was not clear about.

And so often in these prophetic passages, people have attempted to impose their own schemes, their own timetables, if you like, their own route map to the end.

And the Bible makes it clear to us there is mystery here. Notice that Daniel himself did not understand. Verse 8, I heard, but I did not understand. And we've got to be very, very careful not to be dogmatic on things which scripture leaves open. The actual sequence of the events which will lead to the coming of Christ is fiercely debated. [15:32] The important thing that we need to know and need to live by is that Christ will come, that he will reign, that God will be God, and the world will know it.

And Daniel surely is a good model here for fearless proclamation of the non-negotiables, but a willingness to be flexible on disputed matters.

So, they pass on the message, that message which changes lives, that message which leads people to conversion, that message which continues to shape their lives and continues to make them like Christ.

These are people who fulfill the purpose for which they were created. These are people who pass on the message. And thirdly, these are people who persevere to the end.

This is the point, I think, of verses 12 and 13. Indeed, verse 11, first of all. And from the time the regular burnt offering is taken away and the abomination that makes desolate is set up shall be 1,290 days.

[16:43] That refers to the time I mentioned already when the Syrian Antiochus polluted the temple, offered pig's flesh on the altar of burnt offering and set up a statue of Zeus, the Greek god, in the Holy of Holies.

And Jesus himself speaks about the abomination that makes desolate. Blessed is he who waits and arrives.

Blessed is he who perseveres. And I think there is a double promise here. First of all, there is a promise of security in the present crisis.

And this is a Solomon binding promise. Back in verse 7, I heard the man clothed in linen who was above the waters of the stream. He raised his right hand and his left hand towards heaven and swore by him who lives forever.

Deliberate echo of the words of Deuteronomy 32, the covenant words. But by raising both hands to heaven, that shows the solemnity of the oath.

[17:44] God is totally committed to his people. He is committed to them by promises that he cannot and will not break. And even the apparent shattering of the power of the holy people in verse 7, even the apparent destruction of the public testimony of God cannot alter that.

That is one of the areas where there is difference of interpretation. Some passages like this in Revelation 11 could be taken to suggest that just before Christ returns, the public witness of the church will die altogether.

Revelation 11 talks about the two witnesses being destroyed and their bodies lying in the street. Now, that's not the only possible way to take that because the many, many times the word of God seems to have been crushed.

It seems to have been crushed in China in the early 20th century. The seven churches in Asia to which the book of Revelation was written, they all disappeared. But the point is, even in times of persecution, even in times of great suffering, of great distress, of great tribulation, as other passages call it, God is there to protect his people during these circumstances.

It may be some will die and some are dying at this very moment, as we know. It may be that the public witness will disappear. What does that do to the kingdom of God?

[19:24] Well, in one very real sense, it does nothing. The kingdom of God still continues, even in spite of the lack of public witness. Charles Spurgeon used these great words at the end of a sermon on the subject, the gospel must succeed.

The gospel will succeed. It cannot be prevented from succeeding. So there is security in the present crisis. And our task is to keep on faithfully passing on that message, to keep on being wise, and not worry too much about the public progress of the church.

God will look after that. God will protect us. But the second thing, surely, is that this message doesn't simply say we are secure in the present crisis.

It says we are secure at the end itself. History will roll on. People will say, as they said in 2 Peter, where is this coming that he promised?

Everything continues just exactly the same way. Things will never change. There will be no end. There will be no coming again. Now there is mystery.

[20 : 37] As I've said, Daniel is not dogmatic. I did not understand. The time is fixed by God. And that's what I think. We've got to try and understand these mysterious numbers in verses 11 and 12. There shall be 1290 days. And then the rather longer period of 1335 days. Both roughly three and a half years.

Both the same period as the time times and half a time. I think what Daniel is saying here, or rather what the angel visitor is saying to Daniel, persevere even when the trouble extends beyond the time expected.

I think that's what's being said. God knows. God has it in hand. We don't know. And that's why we can't predict. Christian history is littered with foolish attempts to predict the second coming. Even though our Lord says no one knows the day or the hour. And every time we hear the day and the hour mentioned, we can simply dismiss it because we don't know. The point is God knows.

[21 : 42] So Daniel is to live faithfully in the present. Go your way till the end and you shall rest. Now, almost certainly, this refers to the fact that Daniel himself is going to die, is going to pass on very shortly.

After all, he must now be in his 80s. If he was taken to Babylon as a boy, perhaps a teenager of 16 or so, at the beginning of chapter 1, the exile is now over, he must be well on in his 80s.

So his own death is fairly near at hand. But beyond that, you shall rest and shall stand in your allotted place at the end of days. Daniel, after his death, will go to the place that's prepared for him. Remember, our Lord says, I go to prepare a place for you. Beyond death, beyond the suffering, there is a glorious future. Now, as we finish, I want to make one other point, which I think is very important.

Most people here are not preachers or missionaries, not working full time, so to speak, for the church. Remember, Daniel was a civil servant.

[22 : 56] Daniel was not a minister. Daniel was not a preacher. He was a civil servant. And surely, the call to be wise is the call for all of us, whatever our sphere, to be faithful in our day.

I want to read some words from James Phillips' Bible notes on Daniel, on this chapter, which I've been reading over the last few weeks. He talks about people in their ordinary work, people at home, people in schools, in factories, in offices, wherever, in universities, wherever they happen to be. And he talks about, first of all, the direct influence as people share the gospel. But this bit particularly, he says there is also an indirect influence.

He writes, places are better and sweeter because the Lord's children have been there. Lives are changed in uncountable ways.

Warmth has been lit in cold rooms and the sweetness of Christ blooms in desert places because the Lord's children have been there.

[24 : 10] See, this is the message for all of us. Those who are wise, the people who know their God, every single one of us, whatever the Lord has called us to be now or whatever he calls us to be in the future.

These words, that you shall rest and stand in your allotted place at the end of days. That is the message of this great chapter. All of us here can be people who know their God because all of us are looking forward to that time.

And it is on that note that the Bible itself falls into expectant silence, isn't it? Even so, come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Let's pray. Father, none of us know exactly the part you have allotted to us in the overall service of your kingdom.

But wherever you have placed us, whatever sphere of service you have called us to, whether it is in the, specifically in the work of the gospel, or whether it is to live that gospel in the places where we are, places where we live, we ask indeed that you will richly bless us and indeed that when our time comes it will be truly able to be said of us that we are wise and that we will shine like the brightness of the heavens.

[25 : 43] We ask that this may be so. For your name's sake. Amen.