

“At the Time of the End”

The Twentieth in a Series of Sermons on the Book of Daniel

Texts: Daniel 11:36-45; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-17

It was April 23rd, 536 BC. The prophet Daniel was standing on the bank of the Tigris River when a mysterious visitor appeared to him and revealed that Daniel was about to receive the next in a series of visions which YHWH had given him throughout his time as an exile in Babylon. The appearance of this mysterious visitor—the pre-incarnate Jesus—caused Daniel great fear. The very presence of the holy visitor exposes Daniel’s sinfulness, causing him to fall on his face. Reassured of God’s favor by the visitor, the vision now given Daniel will foretell the future of those Jewish exiles who had recently departed from Babylon, when Cyrus, the Persian king, released them in 538 BC to return to Judah, rebuild the city of Jerusalem and the temple of YHWH. Jeremiah’s prophecy that Israel’s time of exile was limited to seventy years was now fulfilled. But Daniel learns that although the time of exile is over and the Jews have returned to the promised land, the glory days for Israel are over. Jerusalem and the temple will be rebuilt, but Judah will be trapped between two empires bent on waging war upon each other—the Seleucids (to the North) and the Ptolemies (to the south). As the vision comes to an end, Daniel will be given a glimpse into the distant future, a time when a mighty blasphemer will arise, boasting about himself and making threats to the people of God (an Antichrist), who, at the time of the end, will be destroyed by YHWH’s kingdom which triumphs over all on the day of resurrection and final judgment.

The vision recounted in Daniel 11:2-35 is utterly remarkable in that Judah’s future is foretold hundreds of year in advance with an amazing level of accuracy and detail. The vision reads like history written in advance, which is why critical scholars argue that this “vision” must have been written after the fact. We will turn our attention to the details of the passage shortly, but we must not miss the forest for the trees as we proceed. YHWH has ordained Israel’s future (seventy weeks have been decreed) and is directing all things to their appointed ends. Israel’s time in exile has now come to an end. The Jews have returned to Judah and begun to rebuild. But their troubles are not over.

As for their immediate future, the Jews will again possess the land, rebuild Jerusalem, its walls, as well as the temple of YHWH. But in the period which follows (so-called Second Temple Judaism), Judah will function as a vassal state, first of the Persians, and then the Greeks, before finding themselves caught in the middle of a prolonged struggle between two kingdoms (one to the north and one to the south). Despite the troubles to come, YHWH is still fulfilling his purposes, which include the coming of a messianic age and the rise of a future Antichrist at the time of the end.

Daniel’s divine visitor informs the prophet that these historical clashes and political intrigue are the visible manifestation of unseen combat between powerful spiritual forces—the angelic forces of YHWH (including the angels Gabriel and Michael) warring against demonic forces (called “princes”) which manipulate world empires to wage war upon and persecute the people of God. Yet, YHWH will protect his people and his Messiah will come. In fact, Daniel has learned that a coming Messiah will finish the transgression, put an end to sin, atone for iniquity, bring in everlasting righteousness, seal both vision and prophet, and anoint a most holy place, before the time decreed by YHWH is completed (9:24).

What follows can get a bit tedious—especially keeping track of the two dynasties (the Seleucids and the Ptolemies) and their kings (Ptolemys I-VII, Seleucid I-III and Antiochus I-IV), about whom we may have

never heard and probably about whom we may not care—[I think you’ll find the supplied charts helpful]. But this information is important for us to plow through for several reasons, the first of which is the fact this material is included in God’s word. A second is that the fighting about which we will read takes place in and around Judah. This is what the exiles who have returned from Babylon will face for centuries to come. Finally, Daniel was given this prophecy in 536 BC, three hundred years or more before the things about which we will read came to pass. This a compelling argument for the inspiration and authority of Scripture.¹ So, if you lose track of who is doing what to whom, just remember this was foretold hundreds of years in advance—a solid argument that the Bible is God’s word.

Having told Daniel in verse 1 that, “*in the first year of Darius the Mede, I stood up to confirm and strengthen him,*” Daniel’s visitor begins to reveal a number of things about the future kings of Persia—those who will come after immediately after Cyrus. Daniel’s recounting of the vision begins in verse 2, when his visitor tells him, “*and now I will show you the truth. Behold, three more kings shall arise in Persia, and a fourth shall be far richer than all of them. And when he has become strong through his riches, he shall stir up all against the kingdom of Greece.*” The historical record tells us that after Cyrus’ death in 530 BC three Persian kings arose in succession: Cambyses (530-522 BC), Gaumata (522), who was followed by Darius I, who reigned from 522-486 BC. The fourth king foretold is Xerxes (*Ahuserus*) whom we know to be exceedingly wealthy. Xerxes waged war upon the Greeks throughout his reign, but was not successful in defeating them.² The Persians and Greeks engaged a long series of conflicts until the rise of Alexander the Great, who thoroughly defeated the Persians at the battles of Granicus in 334 BC and Gaugamela (331 BC). All of this was foretold in the first verses of Daniel 11.

The rise of Alexander the Great is specifically mentioned by Daniel’s visitor in verses 3-4. “*Then a mighty king shall arise, who shall rule with great dominion and do as he wills. And as soon as he has arisen, his kingdom shall be broken and divided toward the four winds of heaven, but not to his posterity, nor according to the authority with which he ruled, for his kingdom shall be plucked up and go to others besides these.*” Alexander began his military campaigning in 334 BC (invading Asia Minor), but died unexpectedly while in Babylon in 323 BC at the age of 32. Known to be headstrong (“will do as he wills”), Alexander’s Greek empire soon extended from Macedonia, south to Egypt, and east to the Indus River, in what is now Pakistan. Collapsing soon after it was established due to Alexander’s early death and lack of successors, his kingdom was soon divided into four smaller kingdoms (i.e., “the four winds” foretold by the divine visitor). Two of these remnant kingdoms became the Seleucid kingdom to the north and east of Judah (occupying the same region the Babylonians and Persians had previously), and the Ptolemies to the south (the old Egyptian empire). Judah, unfortunately, is right in the middle of these two kingdoms and subject to repeated invasion, and occupation from that time forward, until finally occupied by the Romans in 61 BC—Rome, being the fourth great empire of Daniel’s visions.

The Seleucids and Ptolemies figure prominently in what follows because their actions will greatly impact the people of Judah and the city of Jerusalem. These two empires are specifically identified in verse 5. “*Then the king of the south shall be strong, but one of his princes shall be stronger than he and shall rule, and his authority shall be a great authority.*” The king of the south is Ptolemy I (who ruled from 323-285 BC). One of his best generals was a man named Seleucus, who left Egypt for Babylon and soon

¹ The survey historical events underlying the prophecies of verses 2-35, are based upon the material in; Steinmann, Daniel, 518-532.

² Steinmann, Daniel, 518.

after claimed the title “king,” and then began expanding his new kingdom to the point that it was larger than Ptolemy’s kingdom, and indeed became a threat to it. We know that these kingdoms (under the rule of their dynastic successors), fought one another off and on until about 250 BC, when a peace treaty was signed and a royal marriage was arranged. Berenice (Ptolemy II’s daughter) married Antiochus II, grandson of Seleucus I. This ended up being nothing but trouble.

It turns out that Antiochus II was already married—to a queen named Laodice, who poisoned Antiochus II upon learning of his new wife. Laodice also had Berenice and her young child killed to ensure that her own son, Seleucus II, would rule. This is especially interesting in light of verse 6. *“After some years they shall make an alliance, and the daughter of the king of the south shall come to the king of the north to make an agreement. But she shall not retain the strength of her arm, and he and his arm shall not endure, but she shall be given up, and her attendants, he who fathered her, and he who supported her in those times.”* The one who fathered this daughter (Berenice) is Ptolemy II, she and her court, and her son, will not endure (as the record tells us), and even the one who supported her (Antiochus II) also died soon thereafter. Pretty remarkable since Daniel was given this prophecy in 536 BC.³

The prophecy continues to predict the course of subsequent events with incredible detail. In verses 7-9, Daniel predicts a war between Ptolemy II and Seleucid II (the son of Laodice and Antiochus II). *“And from a branch from her roots [Berenice] one shall arise in his place [Ptolemy II]. He shall come against the army and enter the fortress of the king of the north [Antioch in Syria], and he shall deal with them and shall prevail. He shall also carry off to Egypt their gods with their metal images and their precious vessels of silver and gold, and for some years he shall refrain from attacking the king of the north. Then the latter shall come into the realm of the king of the south but shall return to his own land.”* The Ptolemies recount looting much gold from the Seleucids, and Ptolemy II also managed to put Laodice to death. But, as history would have it, Ptolemy II faced insurrection at home, was forced to return to Egypt, where the armies of Seleucus II followed in an unsuccessful effort to defeat the divided Ptolemies. The Ptolemies were in no shape to attack the Seleucids, exactly as the prophecy describes.

Seleucus II died in 226 BC, was succeeded by his son, Seleucus III, who was killed in 223 BC, only to be succeeded by his brother Antiochus III, a great military leader who became known as Antiochus “the great.” This too was foretold in verse 10. [Seleucid II] *“sons shall wage war and assemble a multitude of great forces, which shall keep coming and overflow and pass through, and again shall carry the war as far as his fortress.”* After Ptolemy III died in 221, his son Ptolemy IV went to war with Antiochus III in 217. Verses 11-12 recount this too with an amazing accuracy. *“Then the king of the south [Ptolemy IV], moved with rage, shall come out and fight against the king of the north [Antiochus III]. And he shall raise a great multitude, but it shall be given into his hand. And when the multitude is taken away, his heart shall be exalted, and he shall cast down tens of thousands, but he shall not prevail.”* Ptolemy IV succeeded against all expectations to capture much Seleucid territory.

Ptolemy IV returned to Egypt but soon died (along with his wife, the queen) under very mysterious circumstances. His son, Ptolemy V became king, but was only 5 years of age. Antiochus III saw this as a great opportunity to get revenge and attacked Egypt, just as predicted in verses 13-19. *“For the king of the north [Antiochus III] shall again raise a multitude, greater than the first. And after some years he shall come on with a great army and abundant supplies. In those times many shall rise against the king of the south [the Seleucids against the Ptolemies], and the violent among your own people shall lift*

³ Steimnann, Daniel, 522; Baldwin, Daniel, 207.

themselves up in order to fulfill the vision, but they shall fail.” “Your own people” (i.e., Daniel’s people—the Jews) refers a brief civil war fought among Jews in Jerusalem about 199 BC between those who favored the Seleucids and those who favored the Ptolemies.

“Then the king of the north [Antiochus III] shall come and throw up siegeworks and take a well-fortified city [Sidon]. And the forces of the south shall not stand, or even his best troops, for there shall be no strength to stand. But he who comes against him shall do as he wills, and none shall stand before him [Antiochus III]. And he shall stand in the glorious land, with destruction in his hand. He shall set his face to come with the strength of his whole kingdom, and he shall bring terms of an agreement and perform them. He shall give him the daughter of women to destroy the kingdom, but it shall not stand or be to his advantage.” This daughter, it turns out, is Cleopatra. *Afterward he shall turn his face to the coastlands and shall capture many of them, but a commander shall put an end to his insolence.”* This is a reference to a new power in the region, Rome, which Antiochus’s Seleucids were forced to serve as a vassal state. It is out of this Seleucid line that the Herod family (in the gospels) will come. *“Indeed, he [the Roman commander, Lucius Cornelius Scipio] shall turn his insolence back upon him. Then he [Antiochus III] shall turn his face back toward the fortresses of his own land [Syria], but he shall stumble and fall, and shall not be found.”* Antiochus was killed in battle in a desert wilderness in 187, trying to loot smaller kingdoms to pay his tribute to Rome.

Antiochus III was followed by his son Seleucid IV, who sent his treasurer to loot the Jerusalem temple, as foretold in v. 20. *“Then shall arise in his place one who shall send an exactor of tribute for the glory of the kingdom. But within a few days he shall be broken, neither in anger nor in battle.”* But Seleucid’s treasurer, it seems, was actually working for Seleucid IV’s brother, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who may have had Seleucid IV (his own brother) poisoned by the hand of the double-dealing treasurer. In any case, Seleucid IV’s reign was short and inconsequential, unlike his more famous and despicable brother, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who humbly claimed the title “manifestation of God.”

Antiochus IV Epiphanes career and tyrannical rule over Syria and Palestine (including Judah) is foretold beginning in verses 21-24. *“In his place [Seleucid IV] shall arise a contemptible person to whom royal majesty has not been given [Antiochus IV Epiphanes]. He shall come in without warning and obtain the kingdom by flatteries. Armies shall be utterly swept away before him and broken, even the prince of the covenant.”* The “prince of the covenant” is thought by many to be a reference to Onias III, the high priest in Jerusalem at the time and the *de facto* leader of Jerusalem’s defenders. *“And from the time that an alliance is made with him he shall act deceitfully, and he shall become strong with a small people. Without warning he shall come into the richest parts of the province, and he shall do what neither his fathers nor his fathers’ fathers have done, scattering among them plunder, spoil, and goods. He shall devise plans against strongholds, but only for a time.”* This refers to the Maccabean wars.

Soon Antiochus IV sets his sights on the traditional enemies of the Seleucids to the south—the Ptolemies and Judah. In verses 25-28, the amazing prophecy continues to predict events with an uncanny accuracy. *“And he [Antiochus IV Epiphanes] shall stir up his power and his heart against the king of the south [Ptolemy VI—whose mother was Cleopatra and Antiochus’ sister] with a great army. And the king of the south shall wage war with an exceedingly great and mighty army, but he shall not stand, for plots shall be devised against him. Even those who eat his food shall break him. His army shall be swept away, and many shall fall down slain. And as for the two kings, [an alliance between Ptolemy VI and VII] their hearts shall be bent on doing evil. They shall speak lies at the same table, but to no avail, for the end is yet to be at the time appointed.”* YHWH is the sovereign Lord over all kings and nations and even in the midst of these wars and rumors of war, YHWH has decreed their ends—which are not yet.

Antiochus IV Euphianes now demonstrates that he is clearly an Antichrist figure. According to verse 28, *“and he shall return to his land [Syria] with great wealth, but his heart shall be set against the holy covenant [the covenant YHWH made with Israel at Mount Sinai]. And he shall work his will and return to his own land. At the time appointed he shall return and come into the south, but it shall not be this time as it was before. For ships of Kittim shall come against him [a direct reference to Balaam’s prophecy in Numbers 24, which refers to the Romans, now growing strong in the Eastern Mediterranean], and he shall be afraid and withdraw, and shall turn back and be enraged and take action against the holy covenant.”* Antiochus, now thwarted by the Romans—if you know the story of Mark Antony and Cleopatra, here is where it fits in—could not pilfer regions as he once could. In fact, a Roman consul named Gaius Popilius Laenas confronted him, drew a circle around Antiochus, and then ordered him to answer his questions before Antiochus stepped out of the circle.⁴ The Romans were now far too strong, and as the quotation from Numbers 24:23 implies, the ships from Kittim had appeared and limited Antiochus, setting the stage for the coming of the Messiah by fulfilling another ancient prophecy.

We learn in verse 30, that now enraged, Antiochus turned his attention back to Jerusalem, to *“pay attention to those who forsake the holy covenant.”* This is a prediction of Antiochus’ efforts to Hellenize the Jews by making them comply with Greek culture, law, and religion. According to verses 31 and following, *“forces from him shall appear and profane the temple and fortress, and shall take away the regular burnt offering. And they shall set up the abomination that makes desolate.”* All of this was foretold of the “little horn” in chapter 8:9-14 and is yet another prophetic reference to Antiochus’ desecration of the Jerusalem temple in 167 BC. Although Antiochus’ efforts almost succeed in destroying the temple permanently, many faithful Jews will resist him. *“He shall seduce with flattery those who violate the covenant, but the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action.”*

The struggle was fierce among the Jews, and against Antiochus. In verse 33, Daniel’s visitor tells him, *“and the wise among the people shall make many understand, though for some days they shall stumble by sword and flame, by captivity and plunder.”* This is a prediction of the rise of the Maccabees and others who opposed Antiochus IV’s efforts to secularize the Jews and turn the Jerusalem temple into a temple of Zeus. The outcome is certain. We read in verse 34, *“when they stumble, they shall receive a little help. And many shall join themselves to them with flattery, and 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.”* Although Antiochus IV almost accomplishes his goal, Daniel’s visitor is very clear—it will not happen because it is not YHWH’s appointed time. Antiochus IV will not do what Titus is able to do two hundred years later in AD 70 because YHWH has not yet willed it.

So far, the vision spells out with great accuracy events about three hundred years future to Daniel, beginning with the rise of the two kingdoms of the Ptolemies and the Seleucids and those who ruled them. The key figure so far is Antiochus IV Epiphanes, and the key event is the desecration of the temple just as Gabriel had revealed to Daniel in the vision recounted in chapter 8. But the vision continues (vv. 36-45) and the question now arises, “is this more information about Antiochus IV Epiphanes?” Or “does Daniel’s visitor jump ahead to speak of the time of the end?” Commentators are very divided about this, but there are two reasons I think why this points to the time of the end. First, in verse 35, the divine visitor himself jumps ahead to speak of “the time of the end,” when the resurrection occurs (Daniel 12:1-4). Second, in verse 36, the figure who is central to the rest of the vision is simply identified as “the king,” not a king of either the northern or southern kingdom as had been done

⁴ Baldwin, Daniel, 215.

previously. I think it best to understand that the closing verses of Daniel 11, speak of a future Antichrist, who will be much like Antiochus IV.

In verse 36, the visitor tells Daniel, “*and the king shall do as he wills. He shall exalt himself and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak astonishing things against the God of gods. He shall prosper till the indignation is accomplished; for what is decreed shall be done.*” This is a proud and arrogant individual, who unlike the others mentioned previously in the vision (all secular kings) is also a distinctly religious figure. This passage from Daniel 11 is virtually quoted by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:3b-4, part of our New Testament lesson. “*For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.*” Daniel’s visitor is very likely speaking of that one whom Paul will later identify as “the man of sin” [lawlessness], that one commonly called “the Antichrist.”⁵

His arrogance is such that “*he shall pay no attention to the gods of his fathers, or to the one beloved by women.*” The imagery here is that this figure craves power so much he sees no need for God, or for marriage or female companionship. As Calvin puts it, “this king, then, should cultivate neither piety nor humanity.”⁶ Because of his lust for power, “*he shall not pay attention to any other god, for he shall magnify himself above all. He shall honor the god of fortresses instead of these.*” This man will love power and war [fortresses] and has no fear of facing his creator and judge. Sounding much like an apostate from the true faith, Daniel is told, this man will serve “*a god whom his fathers did not know he shall honor with gold and silver, with precious stones and costly gifts.*” This could be a reference to false religion which he has embraced after abandoning the true faith. According to verse 39, “*he shall deal with the strongest fortresses with the help of a foreign god. Those who acknowledge him he shall load with honor. He shall make them rulers over many and shall divide the land for a price.*” This man will be a deceitful politician and treacherous deal-maker, much like Antiochus IV Epiphanes, but will embrace a false religion to gain power.

In verse 40, the focus is squarely upon the time of the end. We read, “*at the time of the end,*” that is when the day of judgment comes, “*the king of the south shall attack him, but the king of the north shall rush upon him like a whirlwind, with chariots and horsemen, and with many ships. And he shall come into countries and shall overflow and pass through. He shall come into the glorious land. And tens of thousands shall fall, but these shall be delivered out of his hand: Edom and Moab and the main part of the Ammonites.*” Using the language from earlier in the vision, but now in a symbolic way (since we know that the kingdoms of Edom and Moab no longer existed in Daniel’s own day) Daniel’s visitor explains how this king will be very much like Antiochus. The vision continues in explain verses 42-45b, that “*he shall stretch out his hand against the countries, and the land of Egypt shall not escape. He shall become ruler of the treasures of gold and of silver, and all the precious things of Egypt, and the Libyans and the Cushites shall follow in his train. But news from the east and the north shall alarm him, and he shall go out with great fury to destroy and devote many to destruction. And he shall pitch his palatial tents between the sea and the glorious holy mountain.*”

The details here are difficult to discern, since the nations mentioned are the ground fought over by the

⁵ Steinmann, Daniel, 541; Young, Daniel, 248.

⁶ Calvin, Commentaries on Daniel, II.350.

Seleucids and Ptolemies previously, and now likely symbolic of great nations at the time of the end, engaged in great conflict, trapping the people of God in the middle, just as Judah had been caught between the Seleucids and Ptolemies waging war upon each other as foretold in verses 2-35. What is clear is that the final “king” will defeat a great rival, seek to dominate the “glorious land,” a reference to God’s people, the church, the members of the New Israel.⁷ He will persecute many and engage in a final desperate act to save himself, but as Daniel is told, *“yet he shall come to his end, with none to help him.”*

In this great power struggle and extensive warfare at the time of the end, just when it looks as though this king (of whom Antiochus IV Epiphanes is a type) will prevail while seeking to destroy the people of God, YHWH will active decisively to rescue his people. As Paul explains in 2 Thessalonians 7-8. *“For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.”* Despite the efforts of this arrogant king to eliminate God’s people, he will be personally destroyed by Jesus at his second advent.

On that day, says Paul, *“those who are perishing,”* will do so *“because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.”* As a consequence of their rejection of the truth, *“therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”* What is false is that this final king is to be worshiped and served as if he were the true and living God. This is why he hates the people of God, because they will not give him what he wants. When we profess that “Jesus is Lord” we are also professing that the “man of sin” is not. For this, he will be destroyed when Jesus (Daniel’s divine visitor) returns on the last day to cast this king into the lake of fire, along with his master, the devil (Rev. 20:9).

As Paul looks back at this final section of Daniel 11 (vv. 36-45), and explains to the Thessalonians how it will be fulfilled by a future man of sin (an Antichrist), who will be destroyed by our Lord Jesus, Paul tells us, *“but we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* Because we have been chosen by Christ, we trust in his death and resurrection to save us from the day of wrath, our fate is not destruction, but eternal glory. This is why we need not fear the “time of the end,” but rather should long for it. Come quickly, Lord Jesus.

⁷ Steinmann, Daniel, 545.