

The Stars, the River, and the Time of the End

Daniel Chapter 12 (Revisited) · March 7, 2024

The Wise Who Shine — and What Wisdom Means Here

Verse 3 places before us a figure of great beauty and of great practical weight: they that are wise shall shine as the brightness of the expanse, and they that turn the many to righteousness as the stars forever and ever. But before we can enter into the beauty of the figure, we need to understand what wise means here — because it does not mean what our culture most naturally hears.

In our day, wisdom is associated with academic attainment, intellectual power, the accumulation of knowledge. A man with a doctorate in theology is considered wise with respect to the Scriptures; a man with a brilliant analytical mind is called wise in affairs. But neither of these is what God has in view. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom — and that is available to the newest and simplest believer. It has nothing to do with the size of the brain God gave me, or with how many years I have spent studying. It has to do with knowing God, and living in dependence on Him, and obeying Him.

Simple obedience displays wisdom. The man who does what God says, when God says it, without requiring it to be first ratified by his own judgment — that man is wise in God's sight, whatever the world might think of him. And this is the class that will shine in the tribulation. Not the clever, the well-connected, or the strategically positioned, but the obedient. Those who know their God and act accordingly.

But the people that know their God shall be strong and shall act, and they that are wise among the people shall instruct the many. — Daniel

Stars and the Special Privilege of Darkness

The wise are likened to stars, and the comparison is more exact than it might appear. Stars shine when it is dark. In the daylight they are invisible, overwhelmed by the light of the sun. But when the sun sets and the darkness comes, the stars fulfil their purpose. They were always there; now they are seen.

The time of Jacob's trouble will be the darkest period in the history of Israel and of the world. It is described in terms that exceed any previous suffering — worse than the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, worse even than the Holocaust, though both of those were catastrophic. In that deepest darkness, the wise among the people will shine — not because they sought prominence, but because they have the light of God in them and the darkness cannot extinguish it.

There is a contrast implicit in verse 4. Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased. The ones who run to and fro are gathering information; they are active and busy and accumulating. But the wise do not run. Stars do not move — astronomers call them the fixed stars. They simply shine, from where they are, because of what they are. The contrast is between restlessness and rootedness, between the busyness of knowledge and the stillness of wisdom. The ones who turn the many to righteousness are not running about; they are standing firm, shining, giving what they have because God gave it to them.

Sir Isaac Newton, who wrote a commentary on Daniel, suggested that verse 4 might point to a day when man would travel at the astonishing speed of fifty miles per hour. The sceptics of his day mocked the suggestion. Voltaire wrote that reading the Bible had apparently damaged Newton's great mind. The irony, of course, is that the verse has been fulfilled far beyond what Newton imagined — and the sceptics themselves are an illustration of the principle that knowledge does not produce wisdom. All the knowledge in the world, and none of the

understanding.

The Sealed Book — and When It Is Unsealed

In verse 4, Daniel is told to close the words and seal the book until the time of the end. This was not an act of concealment for its own sake, but a recognition that what had been revealed was for a future time. The things Daniel was shown were not about to happen. Two more world empires had yet to arise, the Messiah had yet to come and be rejected, and an age of grace had yet to run its course. The book was sealed because the time was long.

But there is a point at the time of the end when the sealing is reversed. God will give understanding to a remnant in Israel. The book will be opened to them — not all at once, not completely, but sufficiently. They will understand enough of the prophecies of Daniel and of Matthew 24 to act on what they know. The wise among them will be able to instruct the many. This is one of the marks of the time of the end: a quickening of understanding in the faithful remnant of Israel, as God prepares His people for what is coming.

To us as believers, the book has never been sealed in the same way. The Spirit of God dwells in every believer, and His ministry includes the illumination of Scripture. We are not in the position of waiting for a future unsealing. What Daniel described as closed and sealed is open to us — not because we are wise in ourselves, but because we are privy to the divine viewpoint through the Spirit who unites us to Christ in heaven. This is an extraordinary privilege that ought to produce in us both gratitude and diligence.

The Three Figures and the River — A Meditation

In verses 5 and 6, Daniel sees two figures standing on opposite banks of the river, and a third figure above the waters of the river itself. One of the two on the banks asks the figure above the river how long it will be to the end of these wonders.

The scene is unusual and its details are not extensively explained in Scripture, which calls for interpretive care.

One thought offered in connection with these three figures is that the river between the two banks speaks of the long flow of history that runs between God's two great epochs of dealing with Israel. On one bank stands the history that preceded Nebuchadnezzar — God dealing with His people in the land, reigning through Israel, His glory present in the temple. On the other bank stands the future — the millennial kingdom, Israel restored, the new covenant in effect, the Lord reigning in Jerusalem. Between those two banks flows an enormous river of Gentile history: the times of the Gentiles, the empires, the captivity, the cross, the church age, the tribulation. And above the river stands a figure — God has never ceased to be above history, presiding over all of it, though He may seem absent to those who watch from the bank.

Whether or not that reading captures the full intention of the passage, the principle it expresses is sound: the river of time between God's two great dealings with Israel is not a time when God has abandoned His purposes. He is above it. He governs it. The Scripture of truth has it all set down. Nothing that flows in that river is outside His knowledge or beyond His control.

The Oath Above the Waters

The figure above the waters — one clothed in linen, his hands raised to heaven — swears by Him that liveth forever that the answer to the question is for a time, times, and a half. The posture is striking. Both hands raised to heaven. An oath sworn by the eternal God. This is not casual information delivered in passing. The solemnity of the gesture matches the solemnity of the content. These things will surely come to pass, and they will come to pass within a set time.

Time, times, and a half time: three and a half years, 42 months, 1,260 days. This is the great tribulation — the last half of Daniel's 70th week, during which the

power of the holy people is scattered and the beast exercises his authority. All these things shall be finished when the scattering of the power of the holy people is accomplished. There is an end. God has sworn to it.

And he held up his right hand and his left hand unto the heavens, and swore by him that liveth forever, that it is for a time, times, and a half. And when the scattering of the power of the holy people shall be accomplished, all these things shall be finished. — Daniel 12:7

Go Thy Way, Daniel — A Personal Word

Daniel pressed further: I heard but I understood not. My Lord, what shall be the end of these things? And the answer was simple and personal: Go thy way, Daniel, for these words are closed and sealed till the time of the end. Daniel did not receive fuller explanation. He was told, in effect, that what he could not yet understand was not his to understand at this time. His part was to go his way.

This is a recurring pattern in Daniel's experience. Visions overwhelm him; he is sick for days; he fasts and mourns for weeks; he asks and does not fully receive an answer. And each time, eventually, there is a word to him that is less about the vision and more about his personal calling. Go thy way. You have a way, Daniel. Walk it.

There is something in this for all of us who study prophecy. It is possible to become so absorbed in the questions — who is the Antichrist, when does the tribulation begin, what do the numbers mean — that we forget that we have a way to walk today. The Lord does not give us every prophetic detail precisely because our call is to faithfulness in the present, not to mastery of the future. Knowing the general shape of what is coming is enough to motivate us. We persuade men because we know the terror of the Lord. We live in holiness and godliness because we are waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God. That is enough.

Thou Shalt Stand in Thy Lot

The book closes with a promise to Daniel himself: thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of the days. He will rest — in death, awaiting the resurrection. And then he will stand in his lot. He will have his place. He will receive his portion.

Daniel served four great kings of the ancient world. He saw more of human government — its pride, its folly, its occasional grandeur, its ultimate failure — than almost any other man of God. He watched Nebuchadnezzar lose his mind in the field. He watched Belshazzar weighed in the balance. He watched Darius be manipulated by his own courtiers. He saw the succession of empire after empire in vision, each one more morally degraded than the last. And he saw, beyond all of it, the kingdom that shall not be destroyed.

When that kingdom comes, Daniel will stand in his lot. And those who think about his long service across those courts of idol-worshipping kings cannot help but see the contrast that will be before him. He reigned with men who were, however powerful, fundamentally lost. He will stand in his lot at the end of the days and see what faithful government looks like — the Son of Man reigning in righteousness, the saints of the Most High possessing the kingdom, Jerusalem at the centre of a world at peace. The one who served Nebuchadnezzar will serve in that day under a King who is worthy of service. Thou shalt stand in thy lot, Daniel. At the end of the days.

But do thou go thy way until the end, and thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of the days. — Daniel 12:13
