

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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3/2/25

Sermon Title: The Hamster Wheel

Sermon Text: Daniel 11:2-45

Dan. 11:2 ¶ “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.

Dan. 11:3 Then a mighty king shall arise, who shall rule with great dominion and do as he wills.

Dan. 11:4 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.

Dan. 11:5 ¶ “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.

Dan. 11:6 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.

Dan. 11:7 ¶ “And from a branch from her roots one shall arise in his place. He shall come against the army and enter the fortress of the king of the north, and he shall deal with them and shall prevail.

Dan. 11:8 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.

Dan. 11:9 Then the latter shall come into the realm of the king of the south but shall return to his own land.

Dan. 11:10 ¶ “His 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.

Dan. 11:11 Then the king of the south, moved with rage, shall come out and fight against the king of the north. And he shall raise a great multitude, but it shall be given into his hand.

Dan. 11:12 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.

Dan. 11:13 For the king of the north shall again raise a multitude, greater than the first. And after some years he shall come on with a great army and abundant supplies.

Dan. 11:14 ¶ “In those times many shall rise against the king of the south, and the violent among your own people shall lift themselves up in order to fulfill the vision, but they shall fail.

Dan. 11:15 Then the king of the north shall come and throw up siegeworks and take a well-fortified city. And the forces of the south shall not stand, or even his best troops, for there shall be no strength to stand.

Dan. 11:16 But he who comes against him shall do as he wills, and none shall stand before him. And he shall stand in the glorious land, with destruction in his hand.

Dan. 11:17 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.

Dan. 11:18 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. Indeed, he shall turn his insolence back upon him.

Dan. 11:19 Then he shall turn his face back toward the fortresses of his own land, but he shall stumble and fall, and shall not be found.

Dan. 11:20 ¶ “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.

Dan. 11:21 In his place shall arise a contemptible person to whom royal majesty has not been given. He shall come in without warning and obtain the kingdom by flatteries.

Dan. 11:22 Armies shall be utterly swept away before him and broken, even the prince of the covenant.

Dan. 11:23 And from the time that an alliance is made with him he shall act deceitfully, and he shall become strong with a small people.

Dan. 11:24 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.

Dan. 11:25 And he shall stir up his power and his heart against the king of the south 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.

Dan. 11:26 Even those who eat his food shall break him. His army shall be swept away, and many shall fall down slain.

Dan. 11:27 And as for the two kings, 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.

Dan. 11:28 And he shall return to his land with great wealth, but his heart shall be set against the holy covenant. And he shall work his will and return to his own land.

Dan. 11:29 ¶ “At the time appointed he shall return and come into the south, but it shall not be this time as it was before.

Dan. 11:30 For ships of Kittim shall come against him, and he shall be afraid and withdraw, and shall turn back and be enraged and take action against the holy covenant. He shall turn back and pay attention to those who forsake the holy covenant.

Dan. 11:31 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.

Dan. 11:32 He shall seduce with flattery those who violate the covenant, but the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action.

Dan. 11:33 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.

Dan. 11:34 When they stumble, they shall receive a little help. And many shall join themselves to them with flattery,

Dan. 11:35 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.

Dan. 11:36 ¶ “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.

Dan. 11:37 He shall pay no attention to the gods of his fathers, or to the one beloved by women. He shall not pay attention to any other god, for he shall magnify himself above all.

Dan. 11:38 He shall honor the god of fortresses instead of these. A god whom his fathers did not know he shall honor with gold and silver, with precious stones and costly gifts.

Dan. 11:39 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.

Dan. 11:40 ¶ “At the time of the end, 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.

Dan. 11:41 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.

Dan. 11:42 He shall stretch out his hand against the countries, and the land of Egypt shall not escape.

Dan. 11:43 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.

Dan. 11:44 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.

Dan. 11:45 And he shall pitch his palatial tents between the sea and the glorious holy mountain. Yet he shall come to his end, with none to help him.

Main Point: Even the darkest events of human history are at the command of our God, who works for his purposes and moves all things toward His desired end.

Outline:

1. The Hamster Wheel of Futility
2. The Gift of Vision for God’s Church

Introduction

So when I was fresh out of seminary, and I first came to Pastor at church, I don't particularly know what I was thinking, but I made the rather silly decision that my first sermon series I ever preach at a church would be a series on the book of revelation. I do not really recommend that anybody try that, certainly not as their first sermon series. I actually think that it went much better than you might have expected, but I did feel like I ran into an incredible challenge when I got to the middle of the book and we got to these cycles of judgment, and finding a way to preach these very similar cycles over and over again.

Eventually, I also began a series in the evenings on the book of judges. And I ran into a very similar situation with Judges, because in Judges you have these familiar repetitive cycles where there is rescue by God and then judgment by God, and then the people fall again and there's judgment and then rescue by God and that cycle keeps repeating.

After a while, you preach enough of these books from the Bible, and you start to realize that the Bible is sending us a message about who we are, and about the futility of life under the sun where we are always chasing power and worldly things. There is a predictable repetition and a cycle to this life when we try to live apart from the will of God.

The hamster wheel of history turns, and you start to realize after a while that it turns in a very, very familiar pattern.

In Chapter 11 the man in linen (whom I identified last week as what I believe to be a pre-incarnate vision of Christ) delivers to Daniel a series of predictions outlining a pattern of conflicts that will continue to rock the Ancient Near East for hundreds of years. For the majority of this passage, there are actual historical events that dovetail with these predictions here.

You will notice that attached to today's outline I have included a one page "cheater" document that outlines these events and how they line up with history. I will not be going through this document. This is for you. I know that some of you who are more curious may not feel satisfied with my simplistic summary, so hopefully this document will give you a starting point for your own adventures.

Now, I did wrestle more than usual with how to handle this chapter, but in the end I concluded that I would rather summarize this chapter than painstakingly walk you through the ways that this chapter was fulfilled in the conflicts of Alexander, Ptolemy, Cleopatra, Seleucus, and Antiochus Epiphanes.

Rather than focus on the exquisite details of chapter 11, I want to highlight two main features of this passage that I think will help outline and define what God has for us here.

First, today's passage introduces us to what I'll playfully call The Hamster Wheel of Futility. We'll look at the overall narrative of this chapter in that section. But then second, let's note the gift of vision for God's church. In other words, I want us to appreciate the way God is graciously equipping us by showing us this higher level look of these complex world events today.

1. The Hamster Wheel of Futility

First, let's observe the hamster wheel of futility that is chapter 11 of Daniel.

Starting in verse 2 of chapter 11, the man in linen speaks to Daniel about what for Daniel are still future events.

What we see here are highly specific predictions about kings and nations rising up and being thrown down. In verses 3 and 4 we see the rise of Alexander the great and his kingdom that is broken up. We've seen this already, and you can tell by now that Alexander and his spread of Greek culture throughout the world was an incredibly important part of the unfolding of God's plan. Almost certainly you have Alexander and his short-lived empire to thank for the fact that the New Testament is written in Greek, for example, and that it provided a common tongue with which they could preach over a wide part of the world.

In verses 5-20 we are treated to a prediction of historical events depicting the Ptolemy family who ruled Egypt for about 150 years. This passage relates invasions and conquests, lies, backstabbing, and a perpetual series of chess moves and attempts to conquer one another. The nastiest character, who is described beginning in verse 21 is Antiochus Epiphanes, whom we've already heard about in previous chapters. And of course what makes him so offensive and despicable are

his attempts – among other things – to abolish and remove the Jewish religion and its sacrifices in the temple.

We've already seen plenty about Antiochus when we looked at Chapter 8. Antiochus featured very largely there, and he figures largely here at least up until verse 35.

Now, there is one other thing I have to address about the end of chapter 11. Once we get to verses 36-45 we are looking at predictions of events that no longer seem to have exact historical counterparts. What is said in verses 36-45, as far as we can tell, doesn't really fit with the timeline or the story of Antiochus Epiphanes anymore, so what might we be seeing there?

Well verse 35 says that Daniel's people would be purified "until the time of the end," so it does make sense that what is talked about in verse 36 is now speaking about another time: what's called the "time of the end." Commentators suggest that what we have in verse 36-45 is a future antichrist figure who is an enemy of God's people. This also seems to make sense of what Paul says in 2 Thessalonians when he speaks of the "man of lawlessness," and seems to draw the imagery and inspiration for his "man of lawlessness" from these exact verses.

But notice also that the move from verse 35 to verse 36 is almost imperceptible. Verse 36 still *seems* to be talking about the same person in verse 35, but historically we know it's no longer a fit. Iain Duguid suggest that this might be because Antiochus is just the early version of what is going to keep coming: rulers who do as they please, attack mighty fortresses and make his followers rulers over many. The hamster wheel of history will keep turning long after Antiochus lies in the ground.

You might be tempted to try to find one figure in history who matches this description, but in moments like these we should also remember that according to 1 John 2:18, there are "many antichrists."

So it isn't necessary for us to only be able to identify one person who fits this nasty pattern here in verses 35-46. Many Christians have gotten caught up in this game of sort of "pin the tail on the antichrist," which I think ends up being a distraction from the reality that there are really many antichrists. We should always be on

guard, whatever age we live in. There is never a shortage of enemies of Jesus or his people in the world around us.

Calvin and other commentators then see these sections as depicting the rise of Rome in some respects, but also resembling other future powers, too. Because of this, they speak of what might be called “Rome and beyond.”

In reality, Antiochus is a type of world power, but even he gets displaced by Rome, and Rome becomes the bloated prototype of other world powers and other world leaders that sweep in and have a godless disregard for Yahweh, setting themselves up in authority. It happens over and over again.

Alexander and Antiochus and Rome are hardly the last world powers or leaders to try to take God’s place on the throne of the earth.

Let’s talk about the impact of this prophecy here. How is this supposed to land? Why might Daniel have needed to hear this? Well think about what this lengthy series of prophecies did: it took Daniel and the difficulties that the Hebrews had experienced, and the vision put the pains of exile into historical perspective.

I know this for myself: that when something is falling apart in my life, it feels like there is no one in the world but me. You may even stop and wonder, “Why aren’t people paying more attention to me?” There’s usually nothing in our lives that seems bigger than what *we’re* going through. If I were Daniel I probably would have been tempted to spend the last 70 years of my life thinking that me and my friends in Babylon were the real center of the universe. But in one sense, even this is still a part of the turning of the hamster wheel of history.

And here God is, not only is he saying he’s in control of and fully aware of the seeming chaos and frustrations of human history, but he’s also showing God’s people that they’re meant to patiently endure *through* these things. And they will have to learn to patiently endure until the end of time. Even after they go back to the land again, patient endurance will still be the order of the day.

I’ve emphasized this earlier and I want to return to it. But this message of patient endurance is very important for us as a church to learn. Now, we don’t merely endure. We have the great commission. We have the mission that Jesus has given

to the church. We don't sit on our hands. God hasn't told us to be inactive. But suffering and futility and the hamster wheel of history will keep turning even now.

2. The Gift of Vision for God's Church

Second today, we ought to delight in and appreciate the gift of vision for God's church.

What happens is, God shows these things to Daniel, but the message isn't just for Daniel. This vision is for God's church *throughout* the ages. It relates to things beyond Daniel's own day and lifespan. The prophecy given to Daniel transcends the events of the four centuries leading up to the birth of Jesus.

What we realize we need as we read this is a greater hope than these earthly realms. What we need is an eternal kingdom that has no end, that can't be overturned, that can't be usurped, that can't be thrown down or changed. That will take us to chapter 12, which we will look at next week.

But what are the overarching lessons for us from this chapter? Let me offer you three lessons from the forest that I think keep from getting us too tangled up in the trees.

First, this chapter is offering us an incredible demonstration of God's exhaustive foreknowledge of future free human choices. He knows not only what will happen, but what every human will do.

This is one of those profound realities that distinguish us from God. It also distinguishes God from the false deities of Babylon, and Greece, and Rome and all other world religions as well: God can tell the future, perfectly. This is something God explains in Isaiah 44. Listen to this:

“Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:
“I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.

Who is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and set it before me, since I appointed an ancient people. *Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen.*

Fear not, nor be afraid; *have I not told you from of old and declared it? And you are my witnesses! Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any.*" (Isaiah 44:6-8)

We as a people are shocked nearly every day when we read the news or hear the news. But there is something fortifying about knowing that not only is God not shocked, but that he knew these things before they happened. We may be surprised, but God absolutely is not shocked or scandalized by such things. There is a sweet comfort for us there. The God who holds the universe also holds us. And the same God who holds us is not surprised by anything, ever.

Second, this chapter is showing us that God has established an "appointed time for these events." That phrase "appointed time" is used in verses 27, 29, and 35. Even though evil takes place and happens in this world, we are seeing that that God is in control. He's not merely a passive observer. Even what happens happens because it was appointed... not by some law of fate, but by the personal oversight and wisdom of a good covenant God who loves his people.

Now, I understand, the idea that God appoints whatever happens does rub us the wrong way naturally. We don't like it. This is a thought that many people – even Christians – find themselves scandalized by. And yet look at Scripture. Psalm 33:10-11:

"The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations."

The breadth of that claim is breathtaking in its scope: whatever happens, God is not frustrated. He is the one who frustrates and is not frustrated.

Or think of Ephesians 1:11 which says that God is "him who works all things according to the counsel of his will." All things. Not just the good things. Not just the easy things. In some sense, whatever happens always falls under the counsel of his will. There is nothing in the universe that is superior or higher than God and his own will. If there was, then that thing would be God, not Yahweh.

I could do this all day. The verses will keep coming if we wanted. The point is that even the terrible things that Antiochus and those belonging to Rome and beyond

do must still take place sequestered within the will of God and the time that he appoints for these things. Martin Luther used to say that yes, the devil is fearsome, but we must also always remember that he is still “God’s devil,” whose leash is held by the almighty.

Even the apparent chaotic swirling sea of human machinations and violence are under the appointment of a God who is sovereign, good, wise, and loving. That’s not easy for us to wrap our head around, but if we will accept it by faith, then what a comfort when we might be tempted to give in to worry, anxiety, or despair.

Third, this chapter shows us the futility of these nations and rulers. If there is anything that shines through in this chapter it is the language of kings being broken, frustrated, overthrown, and plans going awry. The mightiest men on earth, and even they don’t get their way and don’t stand for long.

I think Ian Duguid puts it well, speaking of chapter 11:

“On one level, [what happens here is] the continual story of wars and rumors of wars, as one human ruler and empire after another seeks to gain power by cunning or force. Yet though the tide in the affairs of men comes in and goes out, in the end it accomplishes precisely nothing. The balance of power in earthly politics may shift but it never comes to a permanent rest. On the one hand, therefore, Daniel 11 shows us the fallen world pursuing the wind and finding it elusive. What do power and politics gain for all their toil?” (Duguid, p. 200).

You see, Daniel 11 depicts for us a world in flux, a world in conflict, in which earthly kingdoms and rulers vie for power, deceive each other, try to maneuver against one another, and yet constantly find their attempts at power grabs to fail. I don’t know about you, but that seems familiar.

But even Psalm 39:5 tells us that “all mankind stands as a mere breath!” James tells us that all mankind “are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.” The author of Ecclesiastes, speaking about those who only live for what we can see and take and touch, says, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity” (Ecc. 1:2).

I hope you can see this: that there’s definitely something here for a church like ours in a moment like this. It’s like we saw from the dreams Daniel interpreted and the visions he saw earlier in the book: all of these earthly kingdoms and all of

those who hope in them inevitably end up broken and shattered because it's God who has always been the one to appoint their seasons.

If you ask, how does that cycle get broken? How does the hamster wheel of history stop turning like it has? The answer has to be that God himself must stop it.

And I would submit to you the one to do it is the very person I would propose is speaking to Daniel here in this passage today: the man in linen.

Not only is Jesus Christ one who knows. Not only is he one who is in control and not surprised by the world around us. But he's the one who actually entered into world history at precisely the right moment, broke the cycle of sin that defines all of history... Jesus Christ, in his death and resurrection, has thrown the wrench into the gears. And in doing so he puts a stop to the hamster wheel by refusing to fight to control or dominate. Instead, he lays his life down as a sacrifice and atonement for sin, showing all of mankind and all the nations of the world that the one who stands over history is also willing to submit himself to suffering, to torture, and even to death for our sake. But he was also raised up. And even now he sits at the right hand of the father.

By faith, we can enter into that life and see the cycle of history and even of our lives finally broken.

Let's pray.