

ARISE & BUILD

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THE WISE SHALL SHINE

BY MARTIN G. SELBREDE



Rev. Henry Thomas Robjohns (1831-1906) has opened up the text of Daniel 12:3 in a notable way, and as we take stock at the end

of this tumultuous year it

is worth our while to dive into the depths Robjohns identified in this remarkable text. His original sermon notes are linked in the endnotes¹ so you can see, precisely, how badly I have plagiarized and butchered his thoughts. But because we're starting on solid ground, we commend the opening up of this scripture to you as an encouraging word in due season for our times.

A far cry from today's shallow sermons and messages (with precious few but important exceptions), Robjohns's approach plumbs the depths and riches in Daniel 12:3 in a way the Puritans would have recognized and applauded (and even improved upon). So we use his insights as a starting point to act upon them and to extend even further.

This passage often receives a very pietistic treatment. It is a favorite verse among pietists because of how they handle (albeit incorrectly) a key word in it (the word *righteousness*). We will not be repeating that kind of faulty exposition. However, the proper meaning of this scripture has often been lost in florid commentary (qualifying as "pious gush" per Dr. Rushdoony's definition). So we get a substitute for the actual teaching of scripture. Restoring the fuller meaning of the verse, then, is much like what Dr. Rushdoony called an act of intellectual exorcism, with the truth driving out the debilitating dross.

Let's first consider the verse in question and then see how Robjohns unpacks it, re-

storing its full relevance and proper context. Here is the King James rendering of it:

And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever. (Dan. 12:3)

Naturally, contemporary readers too often gloss over the words rather than pausing to consider precisely what is being said. Robjohns does not. In walking through the wording he is able to lift it out of its all-too-controversial end-times setting to show that it goes far, far beyond that: that this text *penetrates the present* with relevance and doesn't merely chart future events clouded by interminable disputes.

This is what Robjohns does, which means we need to follow him to get to the destination of the text. We can then see its immediate application in the task of Christian reconstruction here and now, and can take hold of the divine promises that drive forward that process which all of us are to undertake for the Captain of Salvation.

TWO THINGS AND THEIR RELATION TO LIGHT

On its face, the text speaks of two sets of people: the first set by their characteristic nature (being wise) and the second by their action (leading many to righteousness). Each aspect (an attribute of soul in the first case, an attribute of activity in the second) lead to shining brightness, with the greater intensity and duration (for ever and ever) being assigned to the second set. It should be understood that these can be the same people: you can be wise *and* you can lead many to righteousness. There can be overlap here, and we are invited to draw the appropriate conclusions for ourselves on that point. Further, as great as the first attribute is (and Robjohns unpacks it in detail), the

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action we perform in the second half of the verse is of even greater impact.

This is Robjohns's survey of the two groups embraced by Daniel 12:3:

And they that be wise shall shine etc. (ver. 3). Here are two types of humanity and two destinies. There is a likeness both in the types and in the destinies, such as we might expect from the parallelism of the text; at the same time, there are differences. The one type is in advance of the other; so is the Divine recognition in the one case as against the preceding. In the one case we have an attribute of soul, in the other an activity. The first is followed by a radiance like that of the open sky; the second, by a brilliance like to that of the stars.

We'll follow Robjohns's view of the "firmament" of the King James being the open sky in daytime, viz., as the "open firmament of the heavens" where birds fly (Gen. 1:20). If God is directing our attention to the sky above us, and its brightness, it is with the intent of making an impression on us. The comparison is one that we are invited to make on our own, by casting our eyes skyward to see what God means by it. Robjohns leads the way as he first expounds the meaning of wise and then the bright shining that follows it. Then, and only then, does he unpack the action term that follows, and the greater shining that action generates.

THE DEFINITION OF "WISE"

Appealing to the Hebrew, Robjohns concludes that "the essential idea in the word translated 'wise' is that of a clear eye with a clear outlook." If this concept is lost,

the entire verse loses its intended potency. Robjohns invites us to hold tight to these parallel concepts (clear eye, clear outlook) so that we lose nothing of the word's impact in this context.

The relationship of wisdom, of having a clear eye and clear outlook, to shining light is particularly obvious in Ecclesiastes 8:1, as Matthew Henry has pointed out.

Who is as the wise man? And who knoweth the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom maketh his face to shine, and the boldness of his face shall be changed. (Eccl. 8:1)

Just as Daniel 12:3 connects the *wise* with *light*, with luminosity, so too does Ecclesiastes, which does so for the current world that is, not the world to come (consistent with its focus upon things done "under the sun"). Wisdom not only entails the shining of light emanating from the countenance, it empowers boldness of face: true wisdom embodies courage. The wimpy, pietistic reading of much scripture runs aground on the confidence of the Biblical authors.

We remind the reader that wisdom is something that we can – and should – ask God for. James 1:5 informs us that God is not stingy in giving us wisdom when we ask it of Him – so long as we're not double-minded. This means rejecting confidence in worldly wisdom, which is contaminated with darkness and ultimately toxic to our lives. While the wells of wisdom have unfathomed depths, men can only drink from those depths while on their knees before their Creator. Ask of Him, and wisdom will be your portion.

Robjohns emphasizes the fact of *clarity* in respect to the Hebrew word for wisdom: having a clear eye with a clear outlook. He splits this into five aspects, like so (I've filled out the outline for ease in reading):

1. *The soul is clear.* It is not absolutely clear here on earth, but relatively clear in contrast with the former unregenerate state. It is transparent and pure (Matt 5:8). There is no moral taint of such a kind as to destroy the vision of spiritual and eternal things (John 8:12).
2. *The eye is clear.* (Regeneration makes all things new, that we may see things as they really are.)

While the wells of wisdom have unfathomed depths, men can only drink from those depths while on their knees before their Creator. Ask of Him, and wisdom will be your portion.

.....

3. *The atmosphere is clear.* (Eph. 5:8).

Robjohns chooses this text to illustrate the contrast between walking in darkness in our previous life versus walking in light.

4. *The objects of choice are clear.* In time and in eternity. (The regenerate man's wisdom helps clear away the world's smoke and mirrors.)

5. *The choice of means is clear.* All the present is subjected to the future. Herein lies ever *true wisdom*. (This include strategic considerations, such as "no lie is of the truth," or not doing evil that good may come.)

When Robjohns says "the present is subjected to the future," he is a century ahead of Dr. Rushdoony's point that in Biblical thought the future is logically first,² because it determines past and present due to God's decree governing all reality. If you doubt this, consider that all things will be shaken that only the unshakeable will remain: this is how the future determines the present.

HOW THE WISE WILL SHINE

Robjohns then takes up what Scripture says of the wise: they shall shine. He points out from the following context why this text doesn't merely describe the eternal state, but rather necessarily points to the present, to our current struggles and victories.

Perhaps the text refers mainly to the shining of immortality. We may bear in mind that the shining of the clear-seeing saint – of the saint who is indeed a seer – is not a question of time or place, of aeons or worlds, but one of character. The shining will then be *here* as well as *there*. How, then, does the saint shine? Of what sort is the radiance of the open day-sky?

Here Robjohns directs us to the primary intent of all prophetic scripture: ethical impact, the inculcation of Christian character. ("Seeing that these things be so, what kind of lives ought you to live?") In making this distinction, Robjohns urges us to see the present relevance of the text, namely, how the wise can shine even now.

Robjohns enumerates six different ways that the open day-sky shines, comparing these attributes to the beneficent nature and effects of the wise in sharing godly wisdom to drive back the darkness. If it seems like opulent sermonizing, perhaps that's because modern Christians carelessly slide right by the comparison with the open day-sky, while Robjohns pauses to note its affinities with the soul of the wise. Robjohns isn't getting ahead of his skis at all (as the saying goes): he usually anchors his imagery to scripture.

Of what sort is the radiance of the open day-sky? The light of the sky is:

- *Brilliant.* No light in all the landscape can exceed the brilliance of the sky. No light in all the world of intelligence and morals can exceed that of saintliness.
- *Soft.* No element of pain in it.
- *Diffused.*
- *Victorious.* Clouds may dim the face of the sky. So calumnies, misunderstandings, imperfections, failings, may obscure character. But the light shines through the cloud, and continues after the cloud has passed away.
- *Ministering.* The sky is like an angel of God in the sweetness and beauty of its service. What *relief* to the sick and to the nursing, who out of their lattices watch for the morning! What *cheer* to the strong! What *health*! Sunlight is health. The sun arises with "healing in his wings." So the "Sun of Righteousness." So they that are like him. What *power* to work! The sky holds, as it were, the candle to every worker on earth. How we value *dying daylight*! So wistfully watch we the expiring radiance of the saints we love.
- *Borrowed.* Its brightness is not its

own, but the sun's. So the light of the saints is not theirs, but God's.

See “The Fire of Isaiah 33” in my article *An Eschatology of Fire*³ to understand how character is a critical element in any discussion of walking upright in a crooked world. Being wise, then, is not merely an intellectual attribute, it is a moral attribute. (This is obviously so when we hear of those “wise in their own eyes.”) It is where God's light isn't darkened by human counsel.

WHAT KIND OF LIGHT?

Tragically, too many Christians today think of the children's song, “This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine” when it comes to their light. It is no surprise that the kind of light favored by pietistic Christians has no relationship whatsoever to God's law. But Isaiah certainly saw it differently:

To the law and the testimony: if they speak not according to these, there is no light in them. (Isaiah 8:20)

If our words, our speech, isn't broadcasting the content of God's law, our lamp has already gone out. There is no shining to be had. If “the wise shall shine” and Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35), then the light of the wise is the light of the Law and the testimony. Otherwise, such a Christian has actually installed a blacklight bulb in his lamp.

It is not coincidence that in the Sermon on the Mount, the discussion of Christians as being “light” (Matt. 5:14-16) immediately precedes His reinforcing the validity of God's Law (Matt. 5:17-20). Pietists shrug and look away in contempt, but insofar as the Messiah was concerned the two concerns were glued together. If anything, He was making sure that nobody regarded His discussion of “light” as being substitute for, or as overthrowing, the Law of God. As has been well noted, the sense at the opening of Matt. 5:17 is “Don't even begin to think that I have come to destroy the law or the prophets...” Rather, Christ, as the Light of the World, magnifies the Law of God, the pattern for our sanctification.

Proverbs 6:23 sets forth the same parallel: “For the commandment is a lamp; and the law is light; and reproofs of instruction are the way of life.” So too does Isaiah

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51:4 confirm the relationship, “... for a law shall proceed from me, and I will make my judgment to rest for a light of the people.” No surgical knife of man is sharp enough to divide the Law from the light that God refers to in His Word.

Remember that it isn't “the Sun of niceness” that “rises with healing in its wings” (Mal. 4:2) but “the Sun of Righteousness.” Nothing is healed with the Law being broken: but when the Law is mended and no longer slacked (Hab. 1:4) then the preconditions for healing are activated. We've noted repeatedly how the first chapter of Haggai illustrates this principle: the people suffered economic woes (a hole in their purse and miserable harvest) until they started heading to the forest to collect lumber to resume work on God's house. God, unlike man, gets out ahead of a problem and rewards even the first glimmers of obedience, just as He honors faith the size of a mustard seed.

We'd do well to remember the teaching of 1 John 2:8, that “the darkness is passing away⁴ and the true light is shining already.” We encounter far too many who claim that the darkness is getting worse. We must choose between following the Apostle John or today's gloom-and-doom prophecy teachers. Despite looking out at masses of pagan darkness, John declared that the darkness was in actual process of passing away. When prophecy teachers tell you to trust your eyes, they are instructing you to not trust God or His Word.

THE SECOND GROUP OF DANIEL 12:3

The second group in Daniel 12:3 isn't defined by a moral attribute (wise, clear-eyed with a clear outlook) but rather by *what they do*. They are defined by a specific action. Where the action isn't present, no

members of this group are to be found. Where this action is found, an even greater shining than that of the *wise* of the first clause will be found. Here is how Robjohns explains it.

In order to preach truly and intelligently from this passage, the following points should be observed: “They that turn to righteousness” is the translation of a single word in Hebrew – a verb, of the hiphil conjugation, participial form, plural number, construct case. The verb means “to be right or righteous;” in the hiphil conjugation, “to make one right or righteous.” Here, then, we have the activity of the saint, going forth in this form of instrumentally making men righteous, implying a turning away from wickedness, and doing this in the case of “many.” Turning the sinner to God, so as to be “justified by his grace,” would not exhaust the meaning; it goes beyond that, to the securing at least the elements of personal righteousness in him.

Those last two sentences are the key to a proper understanding. However, we are plagued with interpretations that would effectively erase those last sentences. This would be done in the interests of antinomianism, and is achieved by depriving the term “righteousness” of any active sense whatsoever.

The error of taking the word translated “righteousness” in the sense of passive righteousness that we receive from Christ didn’t originate recently. In the nineteenth century, Carl F. Keil (in the highly regarded Old Testament commentary he wrote alongside Franz Delitzsch) drew attention to this serious misstep.

Righteousness is neither in the law of sacrifices nor anywhere in the Old Testament named as the effect of the sacrifice, but always only *the taking away of iniquity*. Nor is the practice of offering sacrifice anywhere described as a *righteousness*. This word signifies to assist in obtaining, or to lead to, righteousness, and is here to be read in this general interpretation, and not to be identified with the Pauline *dikaïousthai*. The *righteous* are those who by their fidelity to the law, led others to righteousness, showed them by their example and teaching the way to righteousness.⁵

If “the wise shall shine” and Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35), then the light of the wise is the light of the Law and the testimony. Otherwise, such a Christian has actually installed a blacklight bulb in his lamp.

One can understand why the modern antinomian would be uncomfortable with Keil’s explanation. Did you notice the phrase “showed by their example and teaching the way to righteousness”? Do you see how it comports with Matt. 5:19? “Whosoever therefore shall loosen even the least of these commandments and teach men so shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whosoever shall *do and teach them* shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” We wouldn’t be going too far astray to conclude that Christ’s words reflect the sense of Daniel 12:3, for He too is speaking of leading people by example and teaching.

Not surprisingly, Robjohns puts forward a comprehensive approach to understanding this second group, the group that leads men toward righteous conduct by example and teaching. He poses the question, “How can we convert others?” in terms consistent with the text of Daniel 12:3. He lists out his responses first, and then explains why the light that shines from this kind of activity is even more everlasting than the light shed by the wise.

1. By *luminosity of life*.
2. By *word from the lip*. Not necessarily a pulpit-word or a class-word, but a friendly word, and that of the simplest kind.
3. By *unconscious co-operation with others*. Henry Martyn never knew that he was the means of converting a single soul; but he translated the Bible into Persian, and prepared the way for others. “They that sow, and they that reap, shall rejoice together.”

4. By *prayer*.

5. By *gifts of money sustaining the labors of others*.

You'll notice that his first two points cover conduct described in Matt. 5:19 but also extends beyond that scope. The anchors to the Sermon on the Mount are present, but Daniel can be fleshed out further precisely because "Thy commandment is exceeding broad" (Ps. 119:96b). Contrast this with all too many other popular and/or online expositions that restrict the meaning to evangelism only (soul-winning), setting aside the whole counsel of God as superfluous. This is ironic because sanctification and the increase of His government is the focus here, meaning we're not looking at the text with a clear eye: we have muddled the scripture in the interest of antinomian impulses.

HOW THE SECOND GROUP SHINES

While there are similarities with the first group, the *wise*, there are differences. Those who labor to expand the domain of submission to Christ and the Law, leading others to the new covenant that writes God's law on the heart and mind "to obtain spontaneous obedience" (as Warfield puts it), are to shine like the stars in heaven. The text goes one step further: they will even shine forever and ever. This particular light has no end. It is an extraordinary promise from the hand and heart of God for us to embrace. Here is how Robjohns sees it:

[They shine] as the stars for ever and ever. In the destiny of the active aggressive worker we have:

1. *An intense brilliance*. Strictly, daylight is more brilliant than the light of stars; for it obscures it by day, or rather outshines it. But this would not be the popular impression, and on that this Bible-text is based.
2. *A diversity of splendor*. "One star differeth from another." Not only the most eminent workers are to shine, but others in their proportion and degree.
3. *A distinguishing separateness*. Think of the distinctive glory of each worker. Here it is not difference of degree, but of type and kind; e.g., Martin Luther, George

Fox, Madame Guyon, Elizabeth Fry, etc.

4. *Yet oft a clustered glory*. In appearance the stars congregate in clusters; in actuality are marshalled into systems. The fellowships of earth, of heaven: a unity of power.

5. *A growing radiance with nearness of view*. "Distance lends enchantment to the view" has no application here. The stars are suns whose magnificence dawns with our approach. So with the glorified and consecrated in the Church.

6. *A ministration of light and heat and life*.

7. *A subservient splendor*.

8. *A brilliance unlike that of the stars*. Their light does now oft go out. The light of all stars may fade and die. But these saintly workers shine on "for ever and ever." Many motives to Christian service may be urged; but here behold its supreme attractiveness! Contrast with this that other destiny, "shame and everlasting contempt" (Dan. 12:2).

The eternity of their light brings to mind the promise that "their works shall follow them." No matter how negatively the world regards our efforts, the final court of appeal sees things in terms of faithfulness to His Word, and we can move, *now*, in terms of its certainty. There is a sense in which we shall shine *then*, at the Consummation,⁶ but we also are called to shine now as well (see Phil. 2:15). The social gospel is only concerned about people shining *now*, while too many Christians are convinced they only need shine *after* their eschatology is triggered.⁷ We're called to shine now that we might shine then, *neglecting neither*. At no point are we to turn off our flashlights.

If some seek to evade these conclusions by asserting that "wise" is rendered "teachers" in some translations, we point to Hebrews 5:11-6:3. That passage indicates that for the amount of elapsed time that the readers had been Christians, they should have already become teachers instead of being "held back a grade." There is no social promotion in God's school room, and failure to advance to teacher level is considered a moral failure, a position made rigorous in

The Perpetual Kindergarten article published two decades ago.⁸

There is some schizophrenia among theological resources today. Some concede that this passage refers to “guiding others towards a righteous life, which is in alignment with God’s standards” (as a BibleHub source asserts). But these ideas are rarely fleshed out and appear adjacent to other explanations that violate the meaning of Daniel 12:3 to avoid positive consideration of God’s Law regarding sanctification. Of course, if shining like the stars for ever and ever stems from doing and teaching even the least commandments, while our teachers are concealing this fact, they are consigning their disciples to being weak, dull lights indeed, now and eternally. We must do better.

A CONTEMPORARY APPLICATION: CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

We will focus on the best-known form of Christian Nationalism as memorialized in Dr. Stephen Wolfe’s book by that name, which was reviewed by Chalcedon two years ago.⁹ There may be forms of Christian Nationalism that don’t suffer the debilitating features of Dr. Wolfe’s model, but keeping track of them all has turned into a growth industry so we need to limit our scope to the most heavily promoted school of thought, acknowledging that there may be exceptions.

We start with Daniel 12:3’s promise concerning *shining as the stars of heaven for ever and ever*. The light is one that shines here and now and then broadens into the fullness of day at the Consummation of history. How well does Dr. Wolfe’s Christian Nationalism guide Christians into bearing light in the sense that Daniel or his fellow prophets might recognize it?

The problem is that by any strict application of scripture, there is no light in the directives of Christian Nationalism, which argues from Aristotle, Aquinas, and church history rather than exegetically from Scripture (the law and testimony, cf. Isa. 8:20 as above). Being anti-theonomic in its core orientation, Dr. Wolfe’s program for transformation does not inculcate the righteousness in others that the Law prescribes for our collective and individual benefit.

There is a defined path for arriving at the destiny that Robjohns laid out above, but Dr. Wolfe’s map leads to a different road by design. By strict definition, he is not leading “the many” to the kind of righteousness that Daniel 12:3 describes. His perspective amounts to a secular vision for our future overlaid with Christian terminology which seems to conceal its divergence from the whole counsel of God.

A warning as strong as Isaiah 8:20 needs to be taken seriously: if they speak not according to the Law and the testimony, it is because there is no light in them. We’ve not yet seen the Christian Nationalism juggernaut lose any steam, so a continual calling back to Scripture is the pressing need for the coming year. Otherwise, whatever inroads made by Christian Nationalists will have to be wound back, as must be all attempts to build – even unwittingly – on sand instead of rock. 🏰

1. https://biblehub.com/sermons/auth/robjohns/the_shining_of_the_clear_and_the_converting.htm

2. R. J. Rushdoony cites Nathan Wood favorably to this effect in Rushdoony’s *The One and the Many* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1971, 2007), p. 154.

3. <https://chalcedon.edu/resources/articles/an-eschatology-of-fire>

4. “is passing way,” meaning in actual process of passing away, from the Greek *paragetai*. The King James errs in following Jerome’s Vulgate instead of the Greek original of John’s epistle, asserting that “the darkness is past” when in fact there is plenty of darkness in the world yet to be dispelled. However, it is being progressively conquered by the light. Warfield’s exposition of this text is particularly to the point.

5. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983 reprint), Vol. 9, Sec. 2, p. 484.

6. <https://chalcedon.edu/resources/articles/consummation>

7. The faulty rendering “*Then* shall the wise shine” rather than “*And* the wise shall shine” is often pressed in support of limiting the reading to the end of history by arguing for absolute succession in time, rather than it being an important supplemental commentary by Daniel. Even more restrictive are interpretations asserting that this passage “especially comforts Israelites who will instruct others during [a] future tribulation.” This is even more troubling in light of Paul’s teaching that we are to “shine as lights in the world” *now* (Phil. 2:15).

8. <https://chalcedon.edu/resources/articles/the-perpetual-kindergarten>

9. <https://chalcedon.edu/resources/articles/a-stone-cut-without-hands>

Humanism is collapsing, but is the Church ready to govern in Christ's name?

Rushdoony predicted the times in which we live which is why he focused the mission of Chalcedon on the great work of Christian Reconstruction. The only remedy to what we face is a return to Christian faith, character, and obedience.

Rushdoony wrote, "The Biblical doctrine of theocracy means the self-government of the Christian man," (*Sovereignty*, p. 31) which means the Christian most needs the resources to equip him for Biblical self-government.

The Chalcedon Foundation is a "think-tank for the self-governing Christian," and our mission is to equip Christian families and churches to apply the faith to every area of life and cultivate faithfulness to God's law and covenant in order that Christ's Kingdom might increase.

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